

Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

[Issues](#) [Book Reviews](#) [Projects](#) [Contribute](#) [Subscribe](#) [About](#) [Q](#)



Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

Editors' Introduction: Lateral Changes

by Robert F. Carley, andré m. carrington, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

ABSTRACT This issue marks the addition of a new co-editor and several special projects, including *Lateral's* first podcast, *Positions*. This issue presents two important sections of work, both building on conversations in the field and across publications: "The Black Shoals Dossier," curated by Beenash Jafri, and the second part of "Crip Pandemic Life," edited by Alyson Patsavas and Theodora Danylevich. In addition to these impressive sections, the issue features three research articles and ten book reviews.

KEYWORDS cultural studies, publishing, scholarship, scholarly communication, podcast

As an open access, peer reviewed publication that is run entirely on volunteer labor, *Lateral* is necessarily driven by the energy and ideas of those who make up its community: editors, authors, reviewers, Cultural Studies Association members, and many others at the center of and on the edges of the broad field of cultural studies. This makes the journal both entirely precarious, built upon and necessitating the good will of those who labor for it, and fiercely resilient, as those who contribute often do so because they believe in the work of *Lateral* and see the good that comes from a coalitional publishing model.

This issue of the journal arrives amidst the early stages of many other projects that stem from *Lateral's* modes of collaborative, accessible research, and publication. We are quite excited to announce a new open access book series with Amherst University Press. The series, *Emergent Ideas: Lateral Books in Cultural Studies*, offers provocations to the broad field of cultural studies through short, yet theoretically compelling books. Titles in the series will endeavor to remap conceptual terrains of culture in order to better comprehend the complex relations that produce meanings, engender practices, shape emergent relations, and give rise to new social and political subjects. Edited by Robert Carley, Anne Donlon, SAJ, Eero Laine, and Chris Alen Sula, the new book series sets out to stage arguments for a future cultural studies. Like the journal, the books will be open access and freely accessible, opening readership beyond researcher backgrounds, classrooms, and institutional bounds.

The journal itself is expanding in a number of other ways. Notably there are three new sections, all in different modalities: a special section, a new recurring section of the journal, and in several firsts for *Lateral*, a post-publication peer-reviewed podcast. The first episode from *Positions*, "For the Moment, I Am Not Scrolling," < <https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/for-the-moment-i-am-not-scrolling-culp-skinner-kuntsman-miyake-karppi/>> places Adi Kuntzman and Esperanza Miyake, authors of *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: In Search of the Opt-Out Button* (University of Westminster Press, 2022) in conversation with Andrew Culp, Claudia Skinner, and the CSA's New Media & Digital Cultures Working Group, with a scholarly commentary by Tero Karppi, "The Misunderstanding(s) of Disconnection Studies." This work is also the first model of post-publication peer review by the journal, with the conversation transcript finalized before the review, and the two published alongside each other in this issue. Future episodes of *Positions*, led by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter, will similarly rotate through topics and hosts from different Cultural Studies Association working groups < <https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/working-groups.html>> , highlighting new and critical ideas, and showcasing the analytical tools of cultural studies.

An upcoming special section on "Digital Platforms and Agency" is particularly compelling to *Lateral* as the journal expands and develops across projects and as infrastructure itself. Section editors Elaine Venter and Reid Van Schenck ask contributors to consider the relationship between structured power and empowered practices in answering important questions about media, digital platforms, and agency. Abstracts are invited through June 30, 2023 < <https://csalateral.org/upcoming/#digital-platforms-agency>> .

A new section of the journal aims to open important dialogue through staying, revisiting, returning, lingering with those key concepts and words that structure much of the critical work of cultural studies. "Aporias" is an open and ongoing section of the journal and it invites description and debate of key concepts and contradictions in cultural studies. Envisioned as a site of disciplinary memory and a locus for review of the field, this section asks us to "stay[] with the trouble just a bit longer." The deadline is rolling < <https://csalateral.org/upcoming/#aporias>> .

These projects were developed through our new proposal process for emergent initiatives < <https://csalateral.org/contribute/#projects>> . We imagine *Lateral* as a place for CSA members and cultural studies scholars and practitioners to think and make and create work together and we are always interested in discussing ideas for how *Lateral* might support and develop the field of cultural studies.

The co-editors of *Lateral* are very happy to welcome Dr. Yumi Pak to the co-editing team. Yumi is an Associate Professor of Black Studies at Occidental College, whose work < <https://csalateral.org/issue/9-2/from-gwangju-to-brixton-impossible-translation-han-kang->

[human-acts-pak/](#)> was previously published in *Lateral*. Yumi has been working with the journal as a co-editor since the beginning of 2023. Even in that short amount of time, her contributions have already benefited the journal and work published in it.

Lateral's existing project *Years in Cultural Studies* < <https://csalateral.org/years/>> will be calling for a new section editor. A corollary and transformation to existing canonical frameworks¹, presenting the opportunity to revisit as well as revise our field's history. Each of the current publications in this section focuses on a particular year in order to excavate the buried (at times, deliberately so) innovations, demands, and debates that have shaped the field of cultural studies today. While the section currently contains entries for 1956, 1968, 1983, 1986, 1988, and 1990, other years and multiple entries for the same year are welcome, and new editor(s) are invited to propose further shape to this section according to their vision.

This issue contains two important sections of work, both building on conversations in the field and across publications. The first, "*The Black Shoals Dossier*," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier/>> curated by Beenash Jafri, is a conversation between Tiffany Lethabo King and Stephanie Latty, Stephanie Lumsden, Karyn Recollet, and Megan Scribe about King's *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. In this exchange the authors explore and build forms of "feminist and queer care...craft[ed] with and for each other," working against registers of academic and state capture, discipline, and blockade. The other is the third iteration of work curated and edited by Alyson Patsavas and Theodora Danylevich. The first, "*Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present*" < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis/>>," was published in 2021, as COVID vaccines were slowly and unevenly rolling out across the world. It was followed by *Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry* < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/crip-pandemic-life/>> in the fall of 2022, and it now concludes "With Grief and Joy—Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry, Part II." In this section, the editors Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas continue their work of documenting crip culture, in the process understanding their section as creating transformative access to and with the archive. Yet, even as this project draws to a close, the work it represents continues, daily and in flux with the changing conditions of an ongoing and overlapping crises.

In addition to these impressive sections, the issue features three research articles that each develop important strains of thought within cultural studies and *Lateral's* publication history. Nathan Burns considers key concepts and filmographies of queer cinema, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in "'It Means Possibility': Manifestations of Isolation in New Queer Cinema." Burns argues that isolation is both a key thematic in queer cinema since the early 1990s and holds immense potential in imagining queer futures and

possibilities. Ian VanderMeulen's article, "Hearing the Houma: Sound, Vision, and Urban Space in Moroccan Hip-Hop Videos," builds on and expands vital conversations around hip-hop as a musical genre and political force. Centering the analysis on representations of urbanity and class in Moroccan music videos, VanderMeulen makes important connections across aural and visual aspects of hip-hop amidst ongoing discussions and arguments related to the connection between culture, power, and resistance. Finally, Philippe Néméh-Nombré complicates geography and history in "Canada's Colonial and Genocidal Project Begins in Africa." Néméh-Nombré offers intertwined readings of key scenes in the transatlantic slave trade and colonial violence. Considering the ways these scenes have been held separately and distinct from each other, Néméh-Nombré rather unsteadies the even and sequential histories that attempt to neatly contain the violent past.

We are grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with so many from various parts of the broad field of cultural studies. The work in this issue is driven by the work and interest of its community of scholars, activists, and artists. We hope you'll join us for the work ahead.

Notes

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) ↩
-

Author Information



Robert F. Carley

Robert F. Carley is Associate Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station.

[View all of Robert F. Carley's articles.](#)



andré m. carrington

andré carrington is currently Assistant Professor of English at Drexel University and co-founder of the Queers & Comics biennial conference. His first book, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, interrogates the cultural politics of race in the fantastic genres and their fan cultures. He has also contributed to the Eisner Award-winning anthology *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Blackness in Comics and Sequential Art*.

[View all of andré m. carrington's articles.](#)



Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

[View all of Eero Laine's articles.](#)

Yumi Pak

Yumi Pak is associate professor of English at California State University, San Bernardino, where she also holds an appointment as director of Ethnic Studies.

[View all of Yumi Pak's articles.](#)



SAJ

SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan

College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores policing, war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, gender, disability, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

[View all of SAJ's articles.](#)



[Alyson K. Spurgas](#)

Alyson K. Spurgas is Associate Professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty in Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Alyson researches, writes, and teaches about sociologies of trauma, politics of desire, and technologies of care from an interdisciplinary and intersectional feminist perspective. They are the author of *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century* (Ohio State University Press, 2020) and *Decolonize Self-Care* (OR Books, 2023).

[View all of Alyson K. Spurgas's articles.](#)



[Chris Alen Sula](#)

Chris Alen Sula is Associate Provost for Academic Affairs at Pratt Institute and Associate Professor in the School of Information. His research explores the digital humanities as a field, including curricula, the early history of DH, and disciplinarity. He has also published on citation studies in the humanities, the politics of technology, and ethical uses of data and visualization.

[View all of Chris Alen Sula's articles.](#)

Article details

Robert F. Carley, andré m. carrington, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, SAJ, Alyson K. Spurgas, Chris Alen Sula, "Editors' Introduction: Lateral Changes," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.1>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Canada's Colonial Project Begins in Africa: Undoing and Reworking the Inaugural Scenes of Colonial-Racial Violence

by Philippe Néméh-Nombré | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

ABSTRACT Black captivity and colonial violence in New France are distinct but interlinked social formations. This article develops an analysis of captive-colonial violence in Canada by tracing how these two formations are interlinked in practice and in discourse. It examines two "inaugural" scenes: the capture of a "Black Mooress" on the coast of present-day Mauritania in 1441 and the 1603 meeting between a French expedition and the people they called "Savages" on the shores of the St-Lawrence River in Canada. The first pertains to anti-Black violence and captivity. The second pertains to colonial violence and genocide. While the two scenes are usually treated as analytically distinct, as well as temporally and geographically distant, this article brings them together. Doing so is important as it shows how the practical and discursive conditions leading to the two scenes overlapped and how each scene depends on the other. This reading of captive-colonial violence disrupts linear conceptions of time and discrete conceptions of geography to pull "distant" scenes into proximity. Through this approach, the article shows how the two scenes are interlinked in the formation of a new lingua franca of anti-Black violence and genocidal colonial violence in Canada, however different and/or incommensurable they may be

KEYWORDS Canada, slavery, colonial, modernity, Africa

Introduction

And, as they were going on their way, they saw a black Mooress come along (who was slave of those on the hill), and though some of our men were in favor of letting her pass to avoid a fresh skirmish, to which the enemy did not invite them,— for, since they were in sight and their number more than doubled ours, they could not be of such faint hearts as to allow a chattel of theirs to be thus carried off: —despite this, Antam Goncalvez bade them go at her; for if (he said) they scorned that encounter, it might make their foes pluck up courage against them. And now you see how the word of a captain prevaieth among men used to obey; for, following his will, they seized the Mooress.

—Gomes Eanes de Zurara¹

On the twenty-seventh, accompanied by the two savages whom Monsieur du Pont brought to make report of what they had seen in France, and of the good reception the King had given them, we sought the savages at St. Matthew's point, which is a league from Tadoussac. As soon as we had landed we went to the lodge of their grand Sagamore, named Anadabijou, where we found him and some eighty or a hundred of his companions, making *Tabagie* (that is to say, a feast). He received us very well, after the fashion of the country, and made us sit down beside him, while all the savages ranged themselves one next to the other on both sides of the lodge.

—Samuel de Champlain²

The two scenes above are distinct but interlinked. The first points to Black captivity in present-day Mauritania in 1441, while the other points to colonial violence on the shores of the St. Lawrence River in Canada in 1603. In this article, I develop an analysis of colonial-racial violence in Canada by tracing the linkages between these two scenes and the social formations that shaped and grew from them. I show how the two scenes, though seemingly distant in geographical and temporal terms, were proximate and interdependent in their inauguration and produced a new “grammar” of anti-Black violence and colonial violence. This analysis is located in a relational approach and moves against the grain of much historiography and critical theory, which tends to cleave apart the formations of anti-Black captivity, on the one hand, and settler colonial violence, on the other. To apprehend their interdependence, however, requires a disruption of conventional (linear) conceptions of time in order to seize how each scene depended on the other.

The terms used in this article draw significantly from Hortense Spillers. Following Spillers, I use the term “scene” to describe both an ensemble of actions and a surrounding narrative. I also adopt her term “grammar” to mean a technology of imagination through which a set of relations to things and between them are world-building.³ With these terms, it is

possible to examine two inaugural scenes (that is, scenes *considered* inaugural), the new grammars they produced, and finally the interdependence of these scenes and grammars.⁴ The first scene, the above-cited capture of the Black Moorish on the coast of present-day Mauritania in 1441, produces a new anti-Black grammar written onto African bodies, a writing that transforms African people into “ungendered,” fungible, and violatable “flesh.”⁵ It is considered the beginning of a construction of Blackness as and through a violence that requires no justification.⁶ The second scene, the 1603 meeting between the French expedition and the people they called “Savages,” produces an anti-Indigenous grammar written onto Indigenous bodies and lands. It is considered the beginning of (the project leading to) the construction of Indigeneity as erasable through the (beginning of the) permanent occupation of the northeast coast of North America.⁷ While these two scenes appear distinct, I will show in this article that the first establishes the terms of the second. The second, meanwhile, repeats, completes, elaborates further, alters them. The two scenes, in other words, are interdependent.

My analysis in this article requires a disruption of linear time. In so doing, it draws on Tiffany Lethabo King’s analytical revision of slavery and conquest in *The Black Shoals*.⁸ Building on Black grammars and theorizing of conquest pinpointing the coast of Africa and the 1440s as the inaugural place and time of colonial-racial violence,⁹ King readjusts temporally and geographically the inaugural scenes and relations of slavery and conquest into a single process or formation in multiple, interrelated, and porous sequences. The reworking suggested after King, as the following pages show, anticipates and avoids four important limitations of focusing exclusively on one of the sequences: the reification of the 1492 rupture in the critical and analytical apparatus of (non-Indigenous and non-Black) settler colonial studies; the reduction of the abjection of Blackness, in the context of colonial and genocidal occupation, to labor and exploitation, as well as the relative absence of the analytical category of Indigeneity in north-American Black studies; the essentializing of colonial borders to think coloniality in North America; and the equivalence between the ontological totality of anti-Blackness, most notably elaborated in recent years by Afropessimist thinkers,¹⁰ and the non-relationality of the formation of anti-Black violence, that is the assumed equivalence between ontological non-relationality and the impossibility of any commonality or relation with distinct formations of violence.

The first of those limitations narrows colonial violence in the Americas to a white-colonizer-conqueror/Indigenous dyadic model and keeps the abjection of Blackness out of euro-American structuring colonial antagonisms, the category of labor being instrumental and additional rather than the abjection of Blackness being fundamental.¹¹ The second, consequently, fails to take into account, in understanding the abjection of Blackness, that which is in excess of the analytical tandem of labor and exploitation, namely what Saidiya Hartman has called the “fungibility of the commodity,”¹² and dislocates the violence of

slavery from colonial violence.¹³ The third considers colonial violence and coloniality within the geopolitical borders of settler colonial projects regardless of colonial intentions and practices outside these borders, and extracts colonial and genocidal violence in North America from geo-historical processes to which they are linked and even co-constitutive.¹⁴ The fourth conflates the fundamental singularity of the ontological abjection of Blackness and the “noncommunicability” of the formation of anti-Black violence in the face of iterations and technologies of violence that grow out of it, repeat it, influence it or elaborate it further, and thus fails to distinguish singularity and interdependent formations.¹⁵ This article does not reject nor attend to the Afropessimist meta-critique of relationality, and instead argues (in some respects with Frank B. Wilderson) that however different, isolated and/or incommensurable anti-Blackness and Indigenous genocide may be, the making of these distinct forms of violence is relational. By recentering the processes and formations in multiple, interrelated and porous sequences, the undoing and reworking suggested here, after King, allows for the excavation of the similarity and relationality of singular and distinct formations of colonial-racial violence from its inaugural scenes: “The screams of Africans or the ‘grammar of accumulation and fungibility,’ as well as Native death banes or ‘grammar of genocide,’ become audible and can create new soundscapes.”¹⁶

In general terms, this article brings a new approach to an oft-noted event in Canadian history: the rupture of 1603, the *idea* of the inaugural scene of the colonial project first named “New France.” In most accounts, while Champlain is considered the founder of Quebec city, the 1603 scene is considered the beginning of “the possibility of settlement” in today’s Canada,¹⁷ which implies the beginning of colonial violence, dispossession, and genocide. With this scene at the origin of Canada, anti-Black violence is necessarily secondary, with its first recorded event, that is the first enslaved African to set foot in today’s Canada, occurring in 1629. Thinking with King, however, makes it possible to bring another scene, the 1441 raid on the coast of present-day Mauritania, into relation with the first. As I will show, the two scenes are more closely linked than conventional accounts suggest and recognizing their interconnection helps to disrupt the analytical practices that keep them separate and distinct. The resulting analysis shows colonial-racial violence in Canada as a process and formation in multiple, interrelated, and porous sequences, and in so doing refuses the ongoing erasure of anti-Blackness in Canada by locating it at the very foundation of the Canadian settler colonial project. Thus, while this article contributes to the growing conversations on anti-Blackness and colonial violence in the Americas, it is also to be read more specifically as a deciphering and unraveling of the mythological Canadian exceptionalism. Following the movement between Portuguese captain Antão Gonçalves’s 1441 raid on the coast of present-day Mauritania, itself to be thought of as the mediation between what it reproduces and what it breaks from (section 1), and the 1603 meeting between the French expedition and the people Samuel de Champlain called “Savages” (section 2), a movement that reveals itself as non-linear (section 3), this article

suggests a contextualized *lingua franca* of anti-Black violence and genocidal and colonial violence in Canada, however different and/or incommensurable they may be.

1. 1441, or Antão Gonçalves's Raid as the Inaugural Scene of Black captivity

The Portuguese expedition led by Antão Gonçalves in 1441 is the most famous to reach the coast of present-day Mauritania, though it was not the first. Since 1436, writes Gomes Eanes de Zurara in his *Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, a few Portuguese vessels ventured in this direction with similar intentions and economic imperatives, but the extraction has remained non-human—the Portuguese would certainly desire captives since they found traces of “footmarks of men and camels,”¹⁸ but according to their limited knowledge of the area, and due to their limited effective capacities, they settle for sea lions. The Portuguese expedition led by Antão Gonçalves in 1441 is not the first to reach the coast of present-day Mauritania but, berthed near Cabo Blanco like his predecessors, Gonçalves is willing to prove his devotion even more, as his words reported by Zurara suggest, by exceeding Prince Infante Dom Henrique's expectations: “O How fair a thing it would be if we, who have come to this land for a cargo of such petty merchandise, were to meet with the good luck to bring the first captives before the face of our Prince.”¹⁹

Surrounded by nine men and convinced by the word of his predecessors of a human presence on these lands, Gonçalves advances inland, moving away from the coast over a distance of three miles. The heat, however, is overwhelming, writes Zurara, and the footmarks suggest that forty to fifty potential captives are going the opposite direction, toward the coast: “My friends, there is nothing more to do here; our toil is great, while the profit to arise from following up this path meseemeth small, for these men are travelling to the place whence we have come, and our best course would be to turn back towards them.”²⁰ His intuition is right; just as they cut back toward the sea, continues Zurara, Gonçalves and his men see a naked man “following a camel, with two assegais in his hand.”²¹ By their sheer number they make him their first captive, despite his resistance, and decide to cautiously reach their vessel as they sight on a hill nearby the group they assume their captive to be a part of. And it is in so doing, as the introductory epigraph describes, that Gonçalves and his men spot a Black Mooress, a Mooress and/but ‘Black’ that Zurara assumes to be the slave of the group sighted on the hill, with which the Portuguese did not however get to talk. “Following his will, they seized the Mooress.”²²

The scene above inaugurates Euro-modern anti-Black captivity and violence. I refer to this as a scene, following Hortense Spillers, to suggest the ensemble of actions but also the narrative. The scene includes the material violence of captivity, as well as the desires

subtending the violence that began with Antão Gonçalves's 1441 raid. At the same time, it includes the symbolic violence of the racial taxonomy that encircles and supports captivity, a grammar written onto the captive body by force. In the scene, pre-existing conceptions of the body, including its gender, are overwritten by conceptions that license and invite violence. In the process, African beings are transformed into what Spillers calls Black "flesh," the degree zero of social conceptualization—before and outside subjectivity and will. For the first time in human history, as Achille Mbembe summarizes, "the principle of race and the subject of the same name were put to work under the sign of capital."²³ Here, a subject-object is produced for which gender will be accounted for strictly in relation to the creation and reproduction of value, altogether outside human sexuality. As Spillers writes, "The female in 'Middle Passage,' as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart."²⁴

The raid recounted by Gomes Eanes de Zurara in his *Chronicle* marks the beginning of European enslaving presence in Africa, of the transatlantic slave trade and consequently of the Afro-diasporic fungible commodity ("the Black slave"), but also of a new grammar. The latter involves the materialization of a structuring taxonomy based on phenotypical characteristics and social status to justify enslavement, as well as the writing of this grammar on the body qua flesh. As outlined by historian Herman Lee Bennett:

By their actions, the Portuguese launched the transatlantic slave trade in whose wake the early modern African diaspora emerged and in which the "slave" constituted the charter subject. Through the capture of the "Mooress," but in particular by marking her as distinct from the Moors on the basis of juridical status and phenotype, the Portuguese introduced a taxonomy that distinguished Moors from blackamoors, infidels from pagans, and Africans from blacks, sovereign from sovereignless subjects, and free persons from slaves.²⁵

The scene thus encapsulates the inaugural Euro-modern anti-Black violence. But the 1441 raid and its narrative are of limited use as a starting point to theorize anti-Black violence if we approach them outside the broader history that enabled and shaped it. As Bennett suggests, the 1441 raid is best conceived as a structuring mediation between what it reproduces and what it departs from. It is, as I have suggested, an inaugural scene, but we need nevertheless to see it within the continuity of an exogenous social construction of Africa, within the continuity of diplomatic relations between African and European entities, and finally as a paradigmatic *break* from Euro-Christian discourses of (re)conquest. Such attention allows for a better understanding of 1441 as a critical moment, without giving in to its historiographic form of what Michel de Certeau calls the "writing that conquers."²⁶ The writing that conquers, de Certeau argues, "forces the silent body to speak" and supposes temporal breaks according the enunciating position.²⁷ If the "vindication of facts repeats

the forms of their identification [and] [i]ts implicit corollary is one of the preservation of norms and ideologies which determine the division, classification, and organization depending on the *same* postulates,"²⁸ then a critical stance toward the identification of a "beginning" seeks to temper these shortcomings and question the violence of writing history rather than reproduce it.

Undoing the Break: Africa as Quintessential Exterior and the European Discourse on Conquest

To understand the new grammar outlined above, we need to consider the longer history in which Africa was constructed in knowledge by other regions and peoples, and locate the readjustment of European discourse on conquest.

At least since Homer's *Odyssey*, Africa represented the literal end of European knowledge, as the "*symbol of what is as much outside life as beyond life.*"²⁹ This lack of knowledge, however, does not refrain from producing philosophical and geographic "truths"; on the contrary, as Mbembe suggests, the difficulty of accessing the continent's inland triggers its representation as the space of the inhumane and the "inextricability of humans, animals, and nature, of life and death, of the presence of one in the other, of the death that lives in life."³⁰ This is what the different etymological possibilities of the words preceding the lexicon of "Africa" convey: "Ethiopia," "Sudan," or "Niger." These terms, as Christopher L. Miller writes, similarly suggest a subjective auto-constitution through an opposition to what represents Blackness, the impact of the sun on the skin, the burn and the "nature." It is to those same representations that the different etymological constructions of Africa later refer.³¹

This symbolic work produces what Valentin Yves Mudimbe calls a "geography of monstrosity,"³² a geography that would then be symbolically reworked from the mid-fifteenth century onward. With this, Mudimbe argues, "the continent became an inexhaustible well of phantasms."³³ This construction provided the backdrop to European (discourses on) conquest and to European understandings of European-African encounters in the fifteenth century like the 1441 raid, even as the latter significantly reworked this construction. Such a "geography of monstrosity," or "well of phantasms," made possible the materialization of a structuring taxonomy based on phenotypical characteristics and social status to justify enslavement, as well as the displacing of the meaning of conquest at the dawn of European Atlantic expansion.

Another important development in European thought was the conception of conquest and, as Herman Lee Bennett reminds, of its legitimacy: "Is it licit to invade the lands that infidels possess, and if it is licit, why is it licit?"³⁴ While such questions are not rare to Christendom, it is more precisely in canonist Sinibaldo Fieschi's (Pope Innocent IV from 1243 to 1254)

response to it that Herman Lee Bennett suggests we locate the legal regime and political thought leading to 1441's inaugural scene. In his *Commentaria Doctissima in Quinque Libros Decretalium*, written at a time when the Church felt a pressing need to reaffirm its authority, Sinibaldo Fieschi's contribution states that, within certain parameters, *dominium* and the right to live beyond the grace of God should be granted to pagans and infidels in and out of Christian societies. Similar discussions and propositions will proliferate from the late fifteenth century onward, among these Nicolas V's papal bulls and the famous Valladolid debate opposing priest Bartolomé de Las Casas and doctor Juan Gines Sepulveda in 1550–1551, but it is useful to insist on Fieschi's specific relevance regarding 1441's inaugural scene.

Until the thirteenth century, (re)conquest as it is led throughout the *Reconquista*³⁵ generally implied, on both sides, a respect for the beliefs and traditions of the defeated enemy remaining under the conqueror's territorial jurisdiction. But when the Christian kingdoms begin to have the upper hand, their economic and expansionist ambitions prompt a selective rereading of Fieschi's prescriptions. Thus, as Bennett explains:

despite the precedent established by Innocent IV's commentary, temporal authorities drastically transformed their institutional interaction with the non-Christian minority, which carried over into their relationship with the peoples of Guinea. As the Church's hegemony receded, the monarch's power expanded, but dogma continued to affect the secular authorities' practices and nascent traditions.³⁶

The first Portuguese expeditions to the coast of Guinea had no intentions of establishing settlements, signing treaties, religious conversion, or making territorial claims. They are driven instead by economic possibilities. Also, while the discourse of conquest appears throughout Zurara's narrative of the 1441 raid, as Fieschi's rereading by secular authorities would bend it, the practical and moral prescriptions and precautions it laid out are set aside and its usage is primarily strategic and argumentative within intra-European discussions. That being said, regardless of their mercantile intentions, the first Portuguese voyages were discursively framed within the parameters of the above intra-Christendom debates on Christian/non-Christian relations and conquest. As Bennett explains, "as the Portuguese and subsequently the Castilians ventured farther south into the 'land of the blacks,' they constantly had to contend with theoretical and practical recognition that Guinea *did not represent terra nullius*."³⁷

In line with the canonical prescriptions restricting to specific situations the possibility of reducing infidels to slavery, the Portuguese insisted on the unique responsibility of Guinean sovereigns in the deprivation of liberty, thereby absolving themselves of any potential moral fault. But these bending efforts, which at the same time renegotiate the use of the discourse of conquest and prohibit explorers from considering the African continent as a

land without masters, are only relevant between Europeans. Unlike the telos of the construction of Africans as slaves would suggest, at the time of the first encounters, because of both canonical prescriptions *and* limited effective material capacities,

though the Portuguese referred to Africans as objects, in practice they could not render Guinea's inhabitants into this prescribed role and desperately sought an effective strategy with which to obtain "profit" from the "land of the Blacks." Diplomacy, with its focus on institutional formalities and mutual, if grudging, respect for difference, generally offered personal securities and tenuous recognition of private property that effectively facilitated trade.³⁸

It is before and after the diplomatic imperatives and contrived consent; it is offshore, on board, and in the hold of the ship, and in the discursive and geographic space of European claims to sovereignty that the transformation of African beings into Black flesh is operated and written.

These observations allow us to return to the scene of Antão Gonçalves's 1441 raid. The scene, I argued, encapsulates Euro-modern anti-Black inaugural violence: the material violence of captivity and quenched desires for captive objects, and the symbolic violence of the racial taxonomy that supports it, as well as the symbolic violence of the transformation of African beings into Black flesh. Its importance, however, its marking as "beginning" must be considered according to what it reproduces and what it breaks from. The scene, we can now see, involved the re-actualization of a European construction of Africa as the quintessential exterior and the readjustment of European discourse on conquest to fit a mercantile diplomatic strategy expanded by a contrived consent. This reconception makes it possible to consider how the scene is related to another scene, the 1603 meeting between the French expedition and the people they called "Savages." The latter, I will now show, involved a mobilization of possessive desires, of the taxonomical gesture, and of the contextual reworkings of conquest, diplomacy, and contrived consent—elements essential to anti-Black violence.

2. 1603, or The "Kind Reception Accorded to the French by the Grand Sagamore of the Aavages of Canada" as the Inaugural Scene of Colonial Violence

The famous French expedition with which geographer and explorer Samuel de Champlain reaches the St. Lawrence River for the first time, in 1603, is not the first expedition to reach

the St. Lawrence River, nor the first to reach what European geographers have called America. A little over a century earlier, in 1492, following physician Paolo Toscanelli's directions to get to the "places of spices," Admiral Don Cristobal Colon's fleet would approach the archipelago of Lucayes Islands, and the island he would (re)name San Salvador.³⁹ A rather large island, he writes on October 13, 1492, rather green also, inhabited by "very docile" people. Then, some forty years after him, farther north this time, having sailed along the coast of "Terre-Neuffue" until the Gaspé bay, navigator Jacques Cartier would follow the St. Lawrence River until Hochelaga (present-day Montréal). The 1603 voyage, though not the first to reach America or the St. Lawrence, is significant nevertheless. In the overlapping of intentions and actions, of settling ambitions and their planning and achievement, it marks the first moment of the process of foundation of New France. It thus bridges the gap between possessive aspirations of settlement, exploitation, and exploration, and their material and discursive translation within the specific parameters of the French presence in the northeast of the continent.

Having left Honfleur on March 15, 1603, the expedition organized by Aymar de Chaste and lead by Pont-Gravé (designated to represent de Chaste in America) reaches the mouth of "Canada river" on May 20, to reach Tadoussac six days later and then St. Matthew's Point the day after. On board was Samuel de Champlain, an observer whose uncle, sailor Guillaume Allène, one of the rare pilots from La Rochelle who visited the African coast more than once during the sixteenth century, had a significant influence on him.⁴⁰ Samuel de Champlain is invited by de Chaste to document the territory, its resources and people, and to plan exploration, exploitation, and settlement. As David Hackett Fisher explains, "Trade was necessary to the voyage, but its primary purpose was to study the possibility of settlement in New France."⁴¹ Thus "as soon as [they] had landed" Champlain starts noticing, writing down and interpreting.⁴² Received "after the fashion of the country," as the introductory epigraph describes, from his first encounter with some eighty or a hundred "savages" Champlain offers a description of their "rejoicing," their "endurance of hunger," their "maliciousness," their "beliefs and false ideas," their clothing, the "stark" nakedness of women and girls, of "how they walk on snow."⁴³ And from this taxonomical exercise he then recommends, "I think that if any one would show them how to live, and teach them to till the ground, and other matters, they would learn very well; for I assure you that plenty of them have good judgment, and answer very properly any question put to them."⁴⁴

The "Kind reception accorded to the French by the grand Sagamore of the savages of Canada," the *utshemau* (grand captain in Innu-Aimun, the Innu language) Anadabijou, will be the occasion for Champlain to inscribe, categorize and contemplate his hosts in relation to the sought lands, and in relation to settlement, exploration, and exploitation possibilities.⁴⁵ Their being, Champlain describes either implicitly or explicitly, is instrumental, malleable according to colonial necessities and possessive desires. But while

their written inferiority supports and legitimates French claims, while it appears for example providential to “show them how to live” as they are “almost constrained to eat one another,” the encounter, Champlain writes, results in what he deems mutual reciprocity.⁴⁶ Anadabijou, according to Champlain, would say that “he was well content that His said Majesty should people of their country, and make war on their enemies, and that there was no nation in the world to which they wished more good than to the French.”⁴⁷ In relation to the sought lands, and in relation to settlement, exploration, and exploitation possibilities, the strategic back and forth—between the inferiority legitimating the French presence and what appears as a “reciprocity,” allowing the French to speak of “alliance”—does not appear to be in contradiction. “It is the Innu that had to teach the French how to live on these lands. It is them who taught the French everything and, once they knew enough, the French stopped caring about the Innu.”⁴⁸ Alongside cartographic work and the survey of the territory’s resources, the description of the inferiority and utility of Indigenous people and at the same time the negotiation of their (potential, necessary, said reciprocal) proximity appears, beginning in 1603, discursively and materially essential to a permanent French presence in the northeast of the continent.

The scene encapsulates Euro-modern colonial inaugural violence in the northeast of the American continent: the material violence of occupation by erasure, by the quenching of possessive desires, by strategy and by destruction, and the symbolic violence of the racial taxonomy that supports it as well as the symbolic violence of the transformation of Indigenous being into a malleable and erasable object, before social conceptualization, before subjectivity. For the first time on the northeast coast of the continent, permanent European occupation is contemplated and materialized while Indigenous peoples are thought of in relation to sought lands—gender, for example, only being considered in regards to the proximity to nature. The 1603 encounter Champlain writes about in *Of Savages* signals the beginning of European possessive presence on the shores of the St. Lawrence River, of the overlapping of systematic knowledge and occupation, and of European framing of Indigenous (physical and symbolic) being, malleable and erasable, before (European) humanity and naturally subsumed beneath its structuring claims and possessive desires. It also opens, at the same time, the implementation of a specifically French strategy of negotiating proximity with Indigenous peoples of the northeast of the continent.

The scene thus encapsulates the inaugural violence of European possessive and dispossessive presence on the shores of the St. Lawrence River. It represents a double process of occupation and erasure, as well as the contextual overlapping of economic, theological, political, epistemological, and ontological rationalities underlying this process. Like the 1441 raid, however, we cannot understand the 1603 encounter as a punctual

event, an event outside history. Like the 1441 raid, the 1603 encounter is most relevant as a structuring mediation between what it reproduces and what it departs from.

Undoing the Break: 1441 as a Prelude towards the Project Called New France

The critical importance of the 1603 scene is neither punctual nor ahistorical, and has to be considered at the same time in the continuity of the 1441 rationality remediated by Christopher Columbus starting in 1492, in the continuity of European presence on the continent since, and, finally, as a break from the preceding modalities of the French presence.

"There are many birds, which sing very sweetly. There are a great number of palm trees of a different kind from those in Guinea and from ours, of a middling height, the trunks without that covering, and the leaves very large, with which they thatch their houses."⁴⁹

Approximately ten years before setting sail to the "places of spices," Christopher Columbus would visit the west coast of Africa, would visit the Portuguese fort of El Mina. As suggested by the way he describes Cuba on 28 October 1492, this would be an indispensable prelude for him on reaching the Americas. The overhaul of the scholastic geography of feudal Christendom that until then suggested an ontological border between inhabitable and uninhabitable lands, but also the terms of the political rationality legitimating the overlaying of discovery and possession leading to 1441, Sylvia Wynter argues, structured the disposition and claims Columbus laid upon arrival:

The new ethico-behavioral system of 'reason-of-the-state' its new mode of political rationality led him, on arriving, not only to take immediate possession of the new lands in the name of Spain, but also to deal with the peoples of these lands as a population group that could be justly made to serve three main purposes. One of these purposes was to expand the power of the Spanish state that had backed his voyage. The second was to repay his financial backers, as well as to enrich himself and his family with all the gold and tribute he could extort from the indigenous peoples, even from making some into *cabezas de indios y indias* (heads of Indian men and women), who could be sold as slaves, in order to support the acquired noble status that was part of the contract he had drawn up with the Crown before the voyage (as a psycho-social status drive that was to also impel his behaviors). His third purpose was to help accelerate the spread of Christianity all over the world, in time for the Second Coming of Christ, which he fervently believed to be imminent.⁵⁰

To get to where there should not have been land, *this land*; identifying, describing and naming as desire and projection of immediate possession—San Salvador over Guanahani; considering the peoples encountered exclusively to the extent of their usefulness, and in

regards to the non-homogeneity of human species that locates their being before rationality, before theology and before politics; it is following those general terms that European expeditions, notably those of Amerigo Vespucci, Vasco Núñez Balboa, Hernando Cortés and, further north, John Cabot and Giovanni da Verrazano, would be led after 1492. It is, also, among those voyages that Jacques Cartier's expeditions also appear as a historical point of transition. If, until then, the French expedition led by Cartier was sailing on known waters, on June 14, 1534 Cartier's expedition is said to be the first to explore, document, and "capitalize on the potential" found west of Newfoundland, and at the same time to encounter the Indigenous peoples of the land.⁵¹ The first to explore, document and "capitalize on the potential"⁵² found west of Newfoundland, therefore to stage possession notably by planting a cross with the inscription "VIVE LE ROY DE FRANCE,"⁵³ a gesture that, Mudimbe reminds, is in direct continuity with, among others, the Portuguese presence in Guinea:

Generally, such a ceremony presented three major characteristics (Keller et al., 1938): (a) the construction of a physical sign bearing the royal arms, such as a pillar (Portuguese), a landmark or even a simple pile of stones (Spanish), or a cross (English and French); (b) a solemn declaration, perhaps presenting the letters patent received from the king, announcing the new sovereignty and indicating that the possession is taken in the name of, or for, the king; and (c) a symbolization of the new jurisdiction.⁵⁴

The first to encounter the Indigenous peoples of the land with this prospective intention, therefore Cartier is also at the origin of the first European framing, on this part of the continent, of Indigenous (physical and symbolic) being, malleable and erasable, before (European) humanity and naturally subsumed beneath its structuring claims.

Cartier would come back twice again, in 1535 and 1541, with intentions each time more specific, commissions each time more accurate: from exploring Hochelaga and Saguenay, to the royal will of establishing a permanent colony on the shores of the St. Lawrence River, under the authority of Jean-François de La Roque, to expedite the exploitation of resources. Those efforts, however, will not fulfill French aspirations and will remain experimental; they will not translate into material accumulation nor effective possession. That said, as Gordon reminds,

Despite its failure, Cartier's little colony at Charlesbourg-Royal was the first substantially documented European attempt to settle in northern North America. He initiated French contact with and claims on this part of the New World. And although Cartier's gold and diamonds proved worthless, subsequent explorers, such as Champlain, who followed in his footsteps found other wealth in the land.⁵⁵

The 1603 meeting Champlain tells us about appears in straight continuation of the voyages of Columbus and Cartier (and, we can suggest, of his uncle Guillaume Allène in Africa), follows their intentions and aspirations and follows the manner in which they contextually remediate the learnings of 1441. But Champlain's 1603 meeting also significantly departs from them, as much as from the few French expeditions and settlement attempts following Cartier in the second half of the sixteenth century, because it succeeds in materializing, on the northeast coast of the continent, the objectives previously laid out.⁵⁶ Until Champlain, writes Marcel Trudel, neither discovery nor geographical and cartographical work appear among French priorities since Cartier.⁵⁷ But after the wars of religion, ended by the Edict of Nantes (1598), French ambitions northeast of the American continent are not only renewed but also appear tangible; the end of internal conflicts frees up resources and encourages the development of exogenous preoccupations—it announces expansionist possibilities. As Brian Brazeau suggests, "Thus, a site that had long been called New France for various reasons was propitious, in the early seventeenth century, for attempts to fulfill the promise of the name through settlement."⁵⁸

In a Royal Commission dated November 8, 1603, destined to Sieur de Mons, King Henri IV establishes the objectives of the next expedition Samuel de Champlain will be a part of. The commission stresses the need to

bring about the conversion to Christianity of the tribes inhabiting this country, who are God-less barbarians, without faith or religion, and to lead and instruct them in the belief and profession of our faith and religion, and to bring them out of the ignorance and infidelity in which they are sunk; having also long since seen, by the report of the ship-captains, pilots, merchants, and others who for many years have visited, frequented, and trafficked with various tribes of these parts, how fruitful, advantageous, and useful to us, our estates, and our subjects would be the occupation, possession, and colonization thereof.⁵⁹

The commission is written in such a way that it repeats with the utmost precision the response offered by doctor Juan Ginès Sepulveda, regarding European conquest of the Americas, to a question that in turn repeats with the utmost precision the one asked by canonist Sinibaldo Fieschi in 1245, that which determined the legal regime and political thought leading to the inaugural scene of Euro-modern anti-Black violence in 1441. As to whether it is "licit for His Highness to wage war on those Indians before preaching them faith to subject them to his Empire,"⁶⁰ by mid-sixteenth century doctor Sepulveda answers:

I say that from the beginning it is licit to subject those barbarians so they abandon their idolatry and bad rituals, to restrain them from obstructing preaching, to convert them with more liberty and ease so they won't fall back into heresy; so that their faith strengthens

always more with the good company of Spanish Christians, and they abandon barbaric rituals and customs.⁶¹

The materialization of French aspirations being underway, the king confirms what was previously laid out, in a general commission that is especially explicit about the contextual colonial strategy that will be carried out for the establishment of what the French called New France: "Henri IV's gesture shows that the voyage is part of a strategy of territorial organizing and affirmation that includes a politics of alliances."⁶² Alliance, the commission reads, is strategic rather than ethical:

to form, maintain, and sedulously observe the treaties and alliances upon which you and they shall agree, provided that they on their part do likewise, and failing this, to make open war upon them to constrain and bring them to such terms as you shall judge necessary for the honour, obedience, and service of God, the establishment, maintenance, and preservation of our authority among them.⁶³

If both Innu and French diplomats foresee a certain advantage to good relationship, for the French, alliance must be formed and respected for economic (exclusivity), exploitation and occupation/settlement purposes.⁶⁴ The "nation to nation" relationship the French are seeking, therefore, follows rather than precedes possessive intentions; in a context where French ambitions, as much as the Portuguese approaching the coast of Africa, depend on their diplomatic capacities, alliance as contrived consent is a means rather than a goal.

The 1603 scene of the meeting described by Samuel de Champlain, I have argued, encapsulates Euro-modern colonial inaugural violence in the northeast of the American continent. The scene involves the material violence of occupation by erasure, by the quenching of possessive desires, by strategy and by destruction, and the symbolic violence of the racial taxonomy that supports it, of the transformation of Indigenous being into a malleable and erasable object, before social conceptualization, before subjectivity. We can now understand it anew, however, by considering how the 1441 rationality was remediated by Christopher Columbus starting in 1492, how 1603 is in the continuity of European presence on the continent since then, and, finally, how it breaks from the preceding modalities of the French presence: in the remediation of possessive desires, the taxonomical gesture of classification and subjection, the contextual negotiation of conquest as discourse, of diplomacy and of the contrived consent, and at the same time, in its specific materialization initiated with the project called New France. New France, in other words, starts in 1441 in as much as the Portuguese raid of 1441 continues through 1603.

3. Mathieu Da Costa, Mathieu *from the Coast*: Challenging the Unilaterality of the Geo-Temporal Progression from 1441 to 1603

We know very little about Mathieu Da Costa, other than that he must have been the first African to ever reach the northeast region of North America. We also know that it must have been as an interpreter, under contract with Sieur de Mons—under contract, that is, with the person to whom King Henri IV addressed his November 8, 1603 commission, in which are stated the possessive desires and strategic intentions underlying the project called New France; with the person who took Aymar de Chaste's place in 1603 as royal representative and depository of the fur trade monopoly; with the person Champlain would travel again in 1604—and as an interpreter, that is, to secure or help the French with translation and exchanges with Indigenous populations northeast of the American continent. While nothing attests that Mathieu Da Costa did in fact travel to this side of the Atlantic, sources show he signs a contract enrolling him as interpreter for the voyages in Canada, "La Cadie" (Acadia) and "elsewhere" in January 1609 and for up to three years.⁶⁵ While nothing attests that Mathieu Da Costa did in fact travel to this side of the Atlantic, the contract he signs with Sieur de Mons at least attests he was considered to have had the required qualification to—help—deal, exchange, negotiate with Indigenous populations on the northeast coast of North America.

Mathieu Da Costa, "from the coast," probably holds his name from the Portuguese presence in Africa. Is he the descendant of a family of interpreters, upon which the Portuguese depend starting in 1441? From whom, where and how did he acquire the qualifications sought after by Sieur de Mons for his voyages, and what are the said qualifications? Da Costa could be a second, third, or fourth generation interpreter, or not; he could, or not, be the descendant of an interpreter who traveled with a European expedition to America before 1608, or he could have traveled himself to America before this date. He could have acquired said qualifications alongside Indigenous people in Europe, in Amsterdam where sources say he was in 1607, in Rouen where sources say he was in 1609, or elsewhere.⁶⁶ He could also have learned from Europeans well acquainted with North America, or he could simply be well acquainted with European first contact "codes," or with one or more pidgins, without specific knowledge of one or more Indigenous languages. Da Costa could also have never taken part in Sieur de Mons's expeditions; sources cannot attest to his being on the American continent. But we know that the qualifications he is assumed to have predate the (non-)rupture of which 1603 is the start, and that—the extent of—his usefulness is necessarily mediated by the colonial project called New France.

We know very little about Mathieu Da Costa, but what we know and what we can speculate is that the qualifications he is assumed to have, and thus the extent of his usefulness, outline a non-linear and multidirectional movement. His qualifications, as much as their acquisition, challenge the unilaterality of the geo-temporal progression from 1441 to 1603, from the African coast to the shores of the St. Lawrence River. While 1441 paves the way for 1603, the northeast of North America as an ontological, epistemological, and political formation reaches Da Costa in a different direction. If Mathieu Da Costa is well acquainted with one or more Indigenous languages at the time Sieur de Mons requires his services in Europe, it is because these languages traveled in a direction that interrupts what seemed like a linear and unidirectional trajectory. If, otherwise, Da Costa knows enough, for example, of the Basque pidgin in use in the northeast of North America without (or before) traveling there, it is because it bears traces of Portuguese and even more, potentially, that it grows out of a Portuguese pidgin that would predate it on this side of the Atlantic, independently of the Portuguese pidgin emerging after 1441.⁶⁷

And yet, the parameters of the lived experience of Mathieu Da Costa are renegotiated with the beginning of the colonial project in the northeast of North America. If Mathieu Da Costa is at the center of a litigation between Sieur de Mons and Nicolas de Bauquemare who fight over his services, it is that the—already—significant importance of African interpreters is increased, renewed with colonial projects on the American continent.⁶⁸ It is that colonial projects in the Americas determine, further and specify the possibilities emerging with the 1441 raid. If Da Costa appears as an object of desire in view of colonial projects, it is that these projects modulate anti-Black violence. In either case, progression is in crisis; the movement appears as circular rather than linear.

Conclusion

The 1603 meeting plays and replays the violence of possessive desires and possession, of the taxonomical gesture of classification and subjection, and of the contextual negotiation of conquest, diplomacy, and contrived consent inaugurated in 1441. Backed up against one another, the two scenes inscribe, in corresponding and renewed sequences, in a single ontological, epistemological, and political movement, the inception and formation of anti-Black violence and colonial and genocidal violence, however different and/or incommensurable they may be. New France starts in 1441. The Portuguese raid of 1441 continues through 1603. But the movement, Da Costa shows us, challenges linear progression: if the 1603 meeting contextually replays the ontological, epistemological and political project of 1441, the latter is in turn specified, continued, completed by the violence of occupation that then not only appears as the continuation of the movement but also as the starting point of new rhizomatic sequences and directions. If the movement first seems

progressive and unidirectional, the reworking suggested also calls for a crisis of its progression and linearity. The 1603 meeting is not only the follow-up: it initiates new rhizomic sequences and directions as much as it co-determines, furthers, and specifies the ends of the 1441 scene of the raid—the ends of Black abjection and fungibility that the full extent only unfolds with the projects of the New World.

The conceptual field that emerges from this undoing and reworking of the colonial-racial temporality locates the formations of anti-Black violence and colonial and genocidal violence in a multidirectional movement through distinct yet corresponding and renewed sequences. The operation suggested here, in other words, the undoing of unidirectional progression and the reworking of multidirectional connections, locates the project in formation since New France in this movement between the inaugural scenes of violence. In doing so it begins to excavate the terms of a conversation that broadens our understanding of the specific formations of anti-Black, colonial, and genocidal violence, and at the same time points to their fundamental overlapping. Thus, it begins making audible Black and Indigenous perspectives and possibilities before, across, and after colonial-racial epistemological limits.

Notes

1. Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10. ↩
2. Samuel de Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain: 1620–1629* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 2013), 297. ↩
3. Hortense J. Spillers, "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,'" *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747> > . ↩
4. Historians might see a lack of historiography, or even anachronistic and teleological temptations in what follows. However, this article is less about historical events than about their representations and what these representations do. ↩
5. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." ↩
6. See Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). ↩
7. See David Hackett Fisher, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008). ↩
8. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). ↩
9. See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; and Sylvia Wynter, "'1492: A New World View,' Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press), 5–57. ↩
10. See Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intentions* 5 (2011): 1–47. ↩
11. In their extensively discussed 2005 article, for example, Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua suggest that "modes of slavery, and the anti-slavery movement in the United States, were

- premised on earlier and continuing modes of colonization of Indigenous peoples." Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, "Decolonizing Antiracism," *Social Justice* 4, no. 32 (2005): 130. ↵
12. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21. ↵
 13. For example, rather than considering the full scope of anti-Blackness as fungibility and colonial violence, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write that "settler colonialism involves the subjection and forced labor of chattel slaves," a distinct form of "indenture whereby *excess labor* is extracted from the person." Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012) : 6. See also Tiffany King, "Labor's Aphasia: Toward Antiracism as Constitutive to Settler Colonialism," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (blog), June 10, 2014, <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/labors-aphasia-toward-antiracism-as-constitutive-to-settler-colonialism> < <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/labors-aphasia-toward-antiracism-as-constitutive-to-settler-colonialism> > .); George Jerry Sefa Dei, *Reframing Blackness and Black Solidarities through Anti-Colonial and Decolonial Prisms*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017). ↵
 14. For example, discussing the many forms of colonialism in Canadian history, among them what he labels the "Imperial/Commercial Penetration" and "Extractivism" modes, Allan Greer makes no mention of Canadian mining and oil companies abroad. Allan Greer, "Settler Colonialism and Beyond," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 30, no. 1 (2019): 61–86. See also Rinaldo Walcott, "The Problem of the Human: Black Ontologies and 'the Coloniality of Our Being,'" in *Postcoloniality—Decoloniality—Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2014), 93–108. ↵
 15. Frank B. Wilderson writes that "Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness . . . as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions." But while he insists on "noncommunicability" and non-relationality, regarding the *formation* of distinct positionalities he suggests that "the relativity of the Indian's relative isolation and relative humanity, the push and pull of Indians' positional tension, is *imbricated with—if not dependent on—the absolute isolation of the Slave.*" Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): 59, 53 (emphasis added). ↵
 16. King, *The Black Shoals*, 46. ↵
 17. See Fisher, *Champlain's Dream*; Conrad E. Heidenreich and K. Janet Ritch, *Samuel de Champlain before 1603: Des Sauvages and Other Documents Relating to the Period* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); Darryl Leroux, "'The Spectacle of Champlain: Commemorating Québec,'" *Borderlands* 9, no. 1 (2010): 1–27. ↵
 18. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 34. ↵
 19. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 40. ↵
 20. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 42. ↵
 21. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 42. ↵
 22. Zurara, *The Chronicle*, 43. ↵
 23. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 13. ↵
 24. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 72. ↵
 25. Herman Lee Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 166. ↵
 26. Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), XXV. ↵
 27. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 3. ↵
 28. De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 119–120. ↵
 29. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 52. ↵

30. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 49. ↵
31. Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 12. ↵
32. Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 84. ↵
33. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 70. ↵
34. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*, 147. ↵
35. The reconquest of the Iberian peninsula by Christian kingdoms. ↵
36. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*, 155. ↵
37. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*, 155, emphasis added. ↵
38. Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*, 184–185. ↵
39. Cristoforo Colombo et al., *The Journal of Christopher Columbus (During His First Voyage, 1492–93) and Documents Relating the Voyages of John Cabot and Gaspar Corte Real* (London: Hakluyt society, 1893), 40. ↵
40. See Marcel Delafosse, "L'oncle de Champlain," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 12, no. 2 (1958): 208–16; L.-A. Vigner, "Encore Le Capitaine Provençal," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 13, no. 4 (1960): 544–549; and Marcel Fournier, "Le Point Sur La Naissance De Samuel De Champlain," *Cap-aux-Diamants: la revue d'histoire du Québec* 134 (2018): 8–10. ↵
41. Fisher, *Champlain's Dream*, 127. ↵
42. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain*, 297. ↵
43. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain*, 306. ↵
44. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain*, 308. ↵
45. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain*, 297. ↵
46. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain*, 308. ↵
47. Champlain, *The Works of Samuel De Champlain* 300. ↵
48. Sylvie Vincent et Joséphine Bacon, "Les Sources Orales Innues: La Fondation de Québec et Ses Conséquences," in *Au croisement de nos destins: Quand Uepishtikueiauw devint Québec*, ed. Yves Chrétien, Denis Delâge, et Sylvie Vincent (Montreal: Recherches amérindiennes du Québec, 2009), 65 (author's translation). ↵
49. Cristoforo Colombo and al., *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*, 59. ↵
50. Wynter, "1492," 15–16. ↵
51. Allan Gordon, *The Hero and the Historians: Historiography and the Uses of Jacques Cartier* (Vancouver: University of British-Columbia Press, 2010), 26. Gordon notes that many studies suggest, on the one hand, that Jacques Cartier was not the first European to reach the northeast coast of North America and/or that he potentially visited some ten years before his "first voyage," but also, on the other, that many before him traveled up the St. Lawrence River. ↵
52. Gordon, *The Hero and the Historians*, 26. ↵
53. Société littéraire et historique de Québec, *Voyages De Découverte Au Canada: Entre Les Années 1534 Et 1542* (Québec: W. Cowan et fils, 1843), 40. ↵
54. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 59. ↵
55. Gordon, *The Hero and the Historians*, 26. ↵

56. Other such expeditions and settlement attempts include those of La Roche and Chauvin in the same geographical space, but also those of Laudonnière, Ribaut or Villegagnon further South. ↵
57. Marcel Trudel, "Un Nouvel Inventaire Du Saint-Laurent, 1603," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 16, no. 3 (1962): 313–347. ↵
58. Brian Brazeau, *Writing a New France, 1604–1632: Empire and Early Modern French Identity* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 12. ↵
59. Marc Lescarbot and Henry Percival Biggar, *History of New France, vol. 11* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1914), 111–112. ↵
60. Bartolomé de Las Casas and Nestor Capdevila, *La Controverse Entre Las Casas Et Sepúlveda: Précédé De Impérialisme, Empire Et Destruction* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), 207 (author's translation). ↵
61. Las Casas and Capdevila, *La Controverse Entre Las Casas Et Sepúlveda*, 242 (author's translation). ↵
62. Camil Girard and Carl Brisson, *Nitassinan Notre Terre: Alliance Et Souveraineté Partagée Du Peuple Innu Au Québec* (Québec: Université Laval, 2014), 30 (author's translation). ↵
63. Lescarbot and Biggar, *History of New France*, 214. ↵
64. About the arrival of the French at Uepshtikueiau (Quebec City), Innu oral tradition notably suggests, according to Vincent et Joséphine Bacon, that "what the Innu asked the French when they concluded the deal is that his people would never know hunger. Vincent et Joséphine Bacon, "Les Sources Orales Innues," 60. It is the Innu that asked that. He asked that his people never know hunger until the end of times. The French agreed. And only then, the Innu granted him the coast" (author's translation). ↵
65. A. J. B. Johnson, *Mathieu Da Costa and Early Canada: Possibilities and Probabilities* (Halifax: Parcs Canada, 2003), 19. ↵
66. Johnson, *Mathieu Da Costa*, 19. ↵
67. Peter Bakker, "Basque Pidgin Vocabulary in European-Algonquian Trade Contacts," *Algonquian Papers-Archive* 19 (1988). ↵
68. Joan M. Fayer, "African Interpreters in the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Anthropological Linguistics* 45, no. 3 (2003): 281–95. ↵

Author Information



Philippe Néméh-Nombré

Philippe Néméh-Nombré is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment at Concordia University. He is the author of *Seize temps noirs pour apprendre à dire kuei* (2022).

[View all of Philippe Néméh-Nombré's articles.](#)

Article details

Philippe Néméh-Nombré, "Canada's Colonial Project Begins in Africa: Undoing and Reworking the Inaugural Scenes of Colonial-Racial Violence," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.2>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

"It Means Possibility": Manifestations of Isolation in New Queer Cinema

by Nathan Burns | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

ABSTRACT Following the cataclysmic AIDS epidemic in the 1990s, a defiant embrace of the word "queer" and new technology sparked an influx of films by independent filmmakers that were later termed "New Queer Cinema." As a product of its time, New Queer Cinema interrogates the heteronormativity it conflicts with and thus breeds a reimagining of what queer film can look like. The conflict between queer identity and its heteronormative surroundings drives distance between queer individuals and their communities, as well as larger social structures. This distance leads to a sense of isolation. This article explores themes of isolation within select New Queer Cinema films and offers a potential reference point from which we can understand queer life and cultural production in the midst of yet another global illness—COVID-19. Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) highlights isolation from heteronormative social structures, particularly the nuclear family unit. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) focuses on a curation of queer kinship as a survival tactic in the face of this isolation. Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* (1993) and Thomas Bezucha's *Big Eden* (2000) both explore themes of self-imposed isolation. *Totally Fucked Up* provides an essential New Queer Cinema perspective of this phenomenon; meanwhile, *Big Eden* challenges assumptions that queer individuals are destined to be isolated by imagining a future in which this is not the case. Themes of isolation are essential to the New Queer Cinema genre as a product of its circumstances. Yet, it also provides a basis from which the possibilities of future queer cinema and culture can be imagined. Understanding this relationship is critical as we begin to understand the effects of structural and social isolation on the queer community as exacerbated by COVID-19.

KEYWORDS queer, cinema, isolation, heteronormativity

We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*¹

Following the catastrophic AIDS epidemic, newly accessible technologies and a defiant embrace of the word “queer” sparked a proliferation of films by independent queer filmmakers—a genre later termed “New Queer Cinema” by B. Ruby Rich.² Rich wrote that “four elements converged to result in [New Queer Cinema]: the arrival of AIDS, Reagan, camcorders, and cheap rent.”³ The silence about the growing AIDS epidemic from Reagan’s administration and fellow conservative Republicans, and their labeling of AIDS as a “gay cancer,” proved to be deadly (literally and metaphorically).⁴ The government’s inaction and demonization of queer identity led to the deaths of thousands of queer people and the queer community’s public image. The anger, exhaustion, and passion from AIDS activists, queer activists, and the larger queer community in the face of this vilification was central to the New Queer Cinema movement. With the invention of the camcorder, filmmaking became more accessible than ever and did not necessitate a Hollywood-level budget. Combined with an increase in free time thanks to cheap rent, community organizing and creative projects took on a whole new life. Video became a new, easily distributable format that AIDS activists could utilize to take control of the narrative (or lack thereof) surrounding AIDS. In her contribution to *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, Monica B. Pearl writes, “New Queer Cinema is trying to interrogate, rewrite, and reassign responsibility” just as AIDS activist videos aimed to correct misinformation spread by homophobic rhetoric.⁵ Because of the time period and circumstances, the concept of a New Queer Cinema is inseparable from the AIDS epidemic from which it emerged. As Pearl writes, what is at the core of these films is that they seek to interrogate and destabilize the heteronormativity that American society is built on.⁶ New Queer Cinema defies expectations of what queer life, and film, should be and presents queer reality from an unapologetic lens; in the face of both physical and social death, authenticity becomes a form of both resistance and survival.

These films prominently highlight the variety of experiences within the queer community, renounce positive representation, defy traditional film conventions, and sometimes even defy death.⁷ Whether it is intercommunity conflict or the disconnect between individuals and social structures, characters in New Queer Cinema find themselves in conflict with their surroundings. This consistent friction drives a stake between these characters and their environment; the physical and emotional distance created as a result leads to a sense of isolation from both community and greater society. Such experiences of isolation are especially prevalent for queer individuals, both on and off the screen, as queer individuals have historically been pushed to the fringes of society.

Isolation is an ever-present reality of queer life—we are continually isolated from our blood families, the legal system, the medical system, and other aspects of social and cultural life. New Queer Cinema exists as the queer community’s reaction to this isolation during the nineties, but its existence as a cultural product is no doubt relevant today. Not only are

remnants of New Queer Cinema and the AIDS epidemic present in contemporary queer culture, but New Queer Cinema as a cultural response to sociopolitical context is, and will be, mirrored in the production of intra-COVID queer culture. Academics are already publishing on the numerous parallels between the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic: enforced social isolation, exacerbation of existing prejudices against minority groups, and the politicization of an illness that is nondiscriminatory. Work has also been published on the connections between COVID, queer identity, and isolation; queer activist efforts amidst COVID; and further connections between AIDS and Monkeypox.⁸ If we are to understand the effects of structural and social isolation on the queer community as exacerbated by global illness, we can start by looking back on the role isolation plays in New Queer Cinema.

Through an analysis of how queer characters in these films contend with isolation as individuals and as a community, this article highlights the relationship between these themes and New Queer Cinema. I focus my analysis on four films: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Gregg Araki's *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), and Thomas Bezucha's *Big Eden* (2000). New Queer Cinema exists as a rich canon with numerous films that frequently transcend time, space, and form. While themes of isolation are prevalent within the entire genre,⁹ these films were chosen due to the range of experiences they explore in an effort to survey the intersectionalities found within New Queer Cinema. I also posit New Queer Cinema as a product of its time and consider possible futures of queer cinema through analysis of *Big Eden*. *Big Eden* marks a turning point for Western queer film. Not only was the film released right at the turn of the century, but it straddles the line between New Queer Cinema and contemporary queer film. Where it mimics the heterosexual romantic-comedy genre in style, it refuses to engage with homophobia in any capacity; it queers the small town, but conventional family structures are at the heart of the film; the main character struggles with his identity, but the film remains hopeful and illustrates a future where queer people exist. *Big Eden* is a (queer) response to New Queer Cinema at the turn of the century and maps a trajectory for contemporary queer film and culture.

By returning to New Queer Cinema to understand the effects of isolation during an epidemic, this article contributes to the field of cultural studies by providing an avenue through which we can understand queer life during COVID-19. Understanding the location of queer culture within its sociopolitical and historical contexts is critical as cultural studies scholars turn their attention toward contemporary intra-COVID queer cultural productions. Queer culture exists as a response to sociopolitical aspects of queer people's everyday lives; by understanding queer culture as an extension of everyday life, I explore how New Queer Cinema, as produced by queer people, contends with the role of isolation in their lives. While the New Queer Cinema genre is international and benefits from a wide variety

of perspectives, this article centers on American films to both narrow the scope and to understand queer American life through a creative, self-representational lens. More specifically, this article centers textual and visual analysis of fictionalized films from the 1990s as well as one from 2000. While there are many documentary-style films essential to the New Queer Cinema canon (e.g., *Paris is Burning*), fictionalized films provide an avenue to creatively explore the realities of queer life and possibilities for the future. Filmmakers have full control over their film (the narrative, script, filming techniques, etc.) and the themes they portray. Textual and visual analysis of cinematic storytelling must be undertaken in combination with each other to address the story, characters, thematic elements, and broader cultural attitudes. By doing so, I gain a well-rounded perspective of the scene and the context in which it—and the filmmaker—is engaging with our culture.

For the purposes of this article, I use the word “queer” to refer to any behavior, attitudes, or existences that are labeled as non-normative, including but not limited to those who are non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual; this broad definition is utilized in an effort to recognize the ways in which such behaviors challenge heteronormativity. Within this article I also delineate between the terms “isolation” and “loneliness.” I define “isolation” as a chronic separation between a minoritized individual and others, whether this separation is between an individual and community or larger societal structures. For “loneliness” I refer to queer theorist Rob Cover’s work, utilizing his definition: “a painful, affective disengagement with relationality.”¹⁰ Loneliness, then, functions as a feeling, while isolation functions as both a feeling and as a systemic problem.¹¹

Tensions resulting from the separation between queer culture and hegemonic societal structures are everyday realities for queer individuals, meaning that loneliness and isolation closely follow for the queer subject. In New Queer Cinema, three key themes emerge to mark this tension and separation. I first turn to isolation from heteronormativity to explore the disconnect between queer identity and heteronormative societal structures. Analysis of the traditional family unit as portrayed in *My Own Private Idaho* begins to unpack this theme. I further examine queer kinship as a survival tactic in the face of this isolation. The creation of and yearning for queer community in *The Watermelon Woman* highlights the connection between isolation and kinship curation for queer individuals. I later examine self-imposed isolation as an effort to protect the self from expected harm resulting from heteronormativity. Scenes from Araki’s *Totally Fucked Up* provide an essential New Queer Cinema perspective of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, Bezucha’s *Big Eden* takes an alternative approach, mapping alternative queer futures and signaling a turn away from New Queer Cinema.

Isolation From Heteronormativity in *My Own Private Idaho*

Gus Van Sant's 1991 film *My Own Private Idaho* combines a loose retelling of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* with an avant-garde filmmaking style. The film follows two young men, Mike Waters (played by River Phoenix) and Scott Favor (played by Keanu Reeves), each on their own journeys of self-discovery. Mike, a street hustler, yearns to find his mother and uses his money from hustling to help him on his journey; Scott, one of his best friends, is the son of the Portland mayor and hustles for money. The film portrays a life of hustling, drugs, squatting, and other "deviant" activities not applauded by larger society—aspects of life which are at the center of the New Queer Cinema movement. In a recent interview, Van Sant reflects on GLAAD's reaction to the film when it came out:¹² "GLAAD thought they wanted images that made gay people look normal, as opposed to not normal. And this was not making them look normal, as far as it relates to straight society."¹³ Van Sant's remarks highlight how normalcy and heterosexuality become equated with one another as GLAAD pushed for portrayals of queer individuals to mimic heterosexual life. In contrast, *My Own Private Idaho* does not mimic heteronormative approaches to life; rather, it indicates the sharp divide between heteronormative society and queer culture. The characters effectively create what queer theorist Michael Warner refers to as a "counterpublic," which he defines as a "scheme where a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and in doing so finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public."¹⁴ Queer community and existence in *My Own Private Idaho* is shown as being intrinsically contradictory to and isolated from heterosexual-dominated culture. These characters represent lives of those on the fringes of American society as they create their own counterpublic and cultivate kinship with one another as a result of marginalization, effectively forming their own familial structure separate from a heteronormative one. One scene of *My Own Private Idaho* portrays this isolation from heteronormativity, both literally and metaphorically, through exploration of familial tensions.

For Scott, his contentious relationship with his father is a key force in his life. Given that his father (Jack) is the mayor of Portland, Oregon, Scott has even more expectations placed on him than others, since his actions affect his father's social status as well. During one point in the film, Jack sends police officers to track Scott down, where they find him in an abandoned warehouse with squatters, drug addicts, hustlers, and others marked as socially deviant. After chasing other inhabitants through the house, they find Scott sexually engaging with Mike. Without acknowledging Scott and Mike's sexual intimacy, the police inform Scott that his father wants to see him. Scott tells them to go away, but then the camera cuts to the next scene where we see Scott standing in front of his father. The two

of them are alone in Jack's office staring at each other from different sides of the room. Jack sits in his wheelchair at his desk, dressed sharply in a suit with his hair gelled back. In contrast, Scott stands on the other side of the desk, shirtless except for a dark jean jacket stained with bleach. His hair is unkempt and a black collar adorns his neck. The visual contrast of this scene alone portrays Scott's alienation from the family unit as something physical that prevents them from connecting—e.g., their attire is visibly different; they are standing far apart; and they have a physical object (the desk) between them. This physical separation is indicative of a more emotional and social disconnect apparent in their dialogue to each other. After staring at Scott for a minute, Jack remarks:

I don't know whether it's God trying to get back at me for something I have done, but your passing through life makes me certain that you are marked. That heaven is punishing me for my mistreatings. . . . I thought, by my soul [your cousin] has more worthy interest to my estate than you could hold a candle to. . . And then I have to think of you. And what a degenerate you are.¹⁵

Scott's queer behavior, exemplified by him sleeping with men for money and hanging around others marked as socially deviant, labels him a "degenerate" in the eyes of his father. In contrast, Scott's cousin, who has been working to support his family on their farm, is more the ideal son that Jack wishes Scott was—one who conforms to heteronormativity. Scott's identity resists heteronormativity as his priorities differ from those expected of him, both productive (i.e., his disinterest in working in the political sphere) and reproductive (i.e., his frequent homosexual activity). This difference in priorities and lifestyles separates him from both larger society and the patriarch of his immediate family unit. He does not conform to what his father wants him to be, and thus he is branded a "degenerate" as his father aims to shame him into conformity.

Initially, Scott denies any implication that he or his activities are reprobate; his first words in response are, "Don't think that, father. You will find out it's not true. And I hope that somebody forgives the people that have swayed your fond thoughts away from me."¹⁶ The "people" that Scott refers to who have swayed his father's thoughts are representative of heteronormativity, implying that heteronormativity is an outside source that has influenced his father to turn against him. Here, there is also an implication that Jack is not at fault for his demonization of his son's actions. Scott's internalized heteronormativity leads him to make excuses for his father's thoughts and actions, rather than reprimand him. After responding to his father, Scott crosses the room and walks around the desk, taking a knee in front of his father and giving him a hug. This traversal of the barrier between them signals the start of Scott's conformity to his father's expectations. This internalized heteronormativity related to his father's expectations proves to be a recurring theme in Scott's journey through the film. He eventually conforms to these expectations and leaves

behind Mike and the others to embrace his life within the political sphere. For Mike, this is a profound betrayal of queer kinship. The two of them had formed an especially close bond during their time together, and as Mike was largely on his own, Scott was a part of Mike's family. In contrast, Scott did not fully understand the bond of queer kinship and did not integrate Mike into his family. Scott's class mobility and blood ties allowed him to fall back into his safety net and return to the political sphere, while Mike was left to pick up the pieces of his life alone.

Scott's relationship with his father is symbolic of not only the divide between queer culture and the traditional family structure, but heteronormativity more generally. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed writes that, "identification with the father (the wish for his love) becomes an allegiance to the form of the family."¹⁷ Since the father is the head of the household in patriarchal society, the father also becomes the figurehead for the nuclear, heterosexual family structure; thus, Scott's betrayal of Mike, and the queer kinship he had built with him, is an expression of conformity to "the family" as a heteronormative construct. His rejection of queer kinship perpetuates the divide between queer culture and heteronormative society—as exemplified by the familial unit—and how queer individuals are isolated from our immediate surroundings, social connectivity, and societal constructs.

The Watermelon Woman's Queer Kinship as a Survival Tactic

In contrast to the rejection of queer kinship within *My Own Private Idaho*, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* embraces queer kinship. As the writer, director, and primary actor of the film, Dunye portrays her own existence and experiences as a Black lesbian. The main character, Cheryl, is not only Dunye's namesake, but is played by Dunye herself, effectively blurring the lines between the film's character and filmmaker. Dunye has written on this lack of separation: "[*The Watermelon Woman* is] about me. It's about my community. I wanted to put people in the film that I saw in my world."¹⁸ *The Watermelon Woman* not only explores this search for queer kinship through Cheryl's journey within the film, but it also serves as a meta-narrative for Dunye's own journey in wanting to see her community represented on screen. While the plot of the film portrays the formation of what Michael Warner would call a queer counterpublic, the existence of the film itself also serves as a testimony to queer counterpublics. Dunye portrays her own personal experiences with queer counterpublic culture on screen. Her desire to see her community on film also functions as a form of retaliation against isolation, particularly historical and cultural isolation. The film's portrayal of both modern and historical Black lesbian existence both highlights and combats this isolation.

The film follows Cheryl, a young, Black lesbian filmmaker who spends her days working at a video store and makes films on the side. She works alongside her best friend Tamara, who is also a Black lesbian. They frequently spend their shifts talking rather than working, with Tamara lamenting over her relationship troubles and Cheryl discussing her progress on her current film project. Within the film, we see two different forms of queer kinship emerge: kinship with lesbians Cheryl knows personally and historical kinship. Cheryl has established connections to other Black lesbians, including Tamara, Tamara's girlfriend, and another woman Cheryl briefly dates. Cheryl is also connected to one of her and Tamara's coworkers—a young white girl who is presumed to be queer in some fashion—and Diana, a white customer that Cheryl ends up dating for part of the film. Tamara frequently criticizes Cheryl's relationship with Diana, calling her Cheryl's "wannabe Black girlfriend."¹⁹ Tamara's attitude toward Diana marks a distinction between generalized notions of lesbian kinship and Black lesbian kinship. As a white lesbian, Diana cannot understand the shared experience of being both Black and a lesbian. While Cheryl herself brushes off these comments, the film further revolves around a second form of kinship that crosses time and space. Cheryl explores this form of kinship through a film project in which she researches a Black lesbian from the early twentieth century.

After watching films from the 1930s and 1940s that featured Black actresses, all of whom are uncredited, Cheryl becomes enamored with one actress who she dubs "The Watermelon Woman." Determined to find out her name, Cheryl embarks on a journey through archives and community connections to find out more information about this woman. Throughout her search, she comes across various roadblocks. For instance, she finds nothing in the library and, after asking random people on the street, no one has any information on the actress. Eventually, her search leads her to a friend of a friend, Lee Edwards, who has a private collection of items related to Black film. Lee's collection takes up most of the space in his house with posters hung on his walls and rooms filled with memorabilia. While not necessarily a collection of queer Black artifacts, Lee's collection brings up another aspect of isolation—a form of isolation that marginalized or underrepresented groups experience from their exclusion from history. Often such histories are not institutionally preserved, or, in the case of "The Watermelon Woman," her existence is not considered historically significant. The character of Lee Edwards has curated this collection as a form of archive not found elsewhere. Even with this collection, he is unable to help Cheryl find more information about her "Watermelon Woman"; however, his artifacts provide Cheryl with context of the time in which "The Watermelon Woman" lived.

After digging through some of her mom's files, Cheryl meets with a woman named Shirley who is finally able to name "The Watermelon Woman": Fae Richards. After researching Fae, Cheryl discovers that she was a lesbian as well. Due to her unpopularity and lower social status as a Black lesbian, Fae's life has failed to be recorded. She is only survived by those

who knew her. Cheryl's commitment to telling Fae's story only grows as she finds out more about her life. Dedicated to sharing Fae's history, Cheryl gives a voice to older Black lesbians who had been excluded from history books. Cheryl's journey leads her to a woman named June Walker, a Black woman who had been Fae's lover for two decades. June is unable to meet with Cheryl but writes her a letter. In it, she writes, "Please, Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in the [Black lesbian] family, you better understand that our family will always only have each other."²⁰ June's words convey a desperate desire for Black lesbian history to be recorded and preserved, but also acknowledge the fact that they have been historically isolated and left behind. By telling the story of Fae Richards, Cheryl embraces a form of queer kinship that transcends time and space, cementing Fae's history amongst everyone else and Cheryl's Black lesbian existence alongside her. Near the end of the film, Cheryl provides a monologue while looking into the camera:

What [Fae Richards] means to me, a 25-year-old Black woman, means something else [than what she meant to those who knew her]. It means hope. It means inspiration. It means possibility. It means history. And most importantly, what I understand, is that I'm going to be the one who says, "I am a Black lesbian filmmaker who's just beginning." But I'm going to say it a lot more and have a lot more work to do.²¹

Fae Richard's existence as a Black lesbian in history provides Cheryl with an anchor to which she can tie her own existence. Knowing her Black lesbian identity does not exist in isolation from others, but is rather in dialogue with other Black lesbians across different generations, alleviates Cheryl's feelings of historical erasure and loneliness due to lack of representation. Archives of queer lives and histories function as a "theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity."²² The queer archive, then, forms from the ways in which queer counterpublics, and the kinship that forms within them, destabilize the heteronormative structuring of history and time. Queer culture, in this context, takes control of the narrative and creates its own archives to combat historical isolation and preserve its own history, place in time, and ways of existing in the world.

Self-Imposed Isolation in *Totally Fucked Up* and *Big Eden*

Social, cultural, and historical isolation is frequently omnipresent in queer lives, often so prevalent that it is believed to be normal or expected. As a result, preemptive action becomes a form of control and self-defense for the queer individual as they try to protect

themselves and their community. As a staple of queer life, self-imposed isolation is prominent within New Queer Cinema, as seen in *Totally Fucked Up* and *Big Eden*.

Like Cheryl Dunye, filmmaker Gregg Araki was a key player that helped shape the genre of New Queer Cinema. His Teen Apocalypse Trilogy of films dove deep into the lives and minds of queer teenagers in the nineties, and were marked by the uncertainty of the future and the sociopolitical climate of the time.²³ The trilogy is "a triffecta of teen alienation, hazy sexuality and aggression," embodying the heart of New Queer Cinema.²⁴ *Totally Fucked Up*, the first film of the trilogy, follows the lives of a friend group made up of six teenagers: four gay men and two lesbian women. The film plays out in fifteen chapters with each presenting a gritty slice of their lives. In each chapter, we see them participating in a variety of activities that include doing drugs in an empty parking garage, wandering malls, having sex, arguing, and giving interviews to Steven (a member of the friend group) about their thoughts on different themes that emerge in their lives.

Throughout the film, the group is shown to have formed their own kinship with one another. Such connection is an example of a queer counterpublic operating in what Jack Halberstam calls "queer time" and "queer space."²⁵ As a group, their own version of culture is markedly different from that of larger society while they also reconstruct the temporal and spatial conceptions of family. For example, despite their young age, Michele and Patricia (the lesbian couple in the group) wish to become parents. They ask their friends to donate sperm, which they then all mix together and attempt to artificially inseminate Patricia, effectively reimagining what the traditional lifecycle and family look like.²⁶ Despite this found family that emerges, we see themes of isolation that are not just culturally imposed, but self-imposed as well. For Andy, one of the central characters, he still feels like an outcast despite being a part of the group. At the very beginning of the film, it is Andy whose line references the title when he states, "I guess you could say I'm totally fucked up."²⁷ His reference to "you" situates himself as distant from the audience, positioning us as outsiders looking in on his life and the lives of his friends. Andy's character development throughout the film centers around his relationship to the concept of love. After meeting at a club, Andy starts to date someone named Ian, a relationship that Andy's friends quickly remark is more serious than Andy's previous relationships.²⁸ Andy heads over to Ian's place late at night wanting to talk. When Andy asks to be let in, Ian blocks the door and declines, implying that he has someone else over who he is having sex with. Feeling upset, Andy tells Ian not to call and storms off to head back to his place. Later, Andy finds himself alone and grappling with the upset of his breakup, angry at both Ian for cheating and himself for becoming so invested. Seeking consolation, he attempts to reach out to his friends, calling them one by one. Yet, none of them answer since they are either busy or already on the phone with each other. This disconnection from his support system serves as the impetus

for his suicide; he slams the phone on the ground angrily and poisons himself before stumbling into a pool where he drowns.

The loneliness Andy feels is effectively what Rob Cover calls a “momentary unliveability in which the logic of suicide is understood as [the] only solution.”²⁹ Andy’s suicide is what *Totally Fucked Up* builds up to and what is at the core of the Teen Apocalypse Trilogy—alienation. While Andy’s suicide was sparked by his momentary disconnect from his peers, it is also more than that. He felt disconnected from his friends, ex-boyfriend, and peers, which symbolizes the isolation felt between queer individuals and larger society (e.g., community) as well as heteronormative structures (e.g., love from “traditional” romantic relationships). Near the beginning of the film, as the group are all sharing their thoughts on love to the camera, Andy remarks, “Love does not exist.”³⁰ From the start of the film, Andy situates himself in opposition to love, criticizing a heteronormative version of love that promotes monogamy with an emphasis on romance, commitment, and sex. He takes his breakup with Ian as proof that heteronormative conceptualizations of love do not exist and extrapolates that to encompass all forms of love. Despite having tangible connections to others, the distance between Andy and this conceptualization of love symbolizes a chronic separation between queer identity and heteronormativity. Andy’s feelings regarding this conflict, fueled by the momentary disconnection between him and his peers, leads Andy toward a physical death stemming from social death. In the face of these forms of external isolation, Andy feels as though suicide is the final, logical step resulting from this externally imposed isolation. This extreme form of isolation imposed by external forces effectively bridges the gap between external and internal. In the moment, Andy believes that taking control of his situation and isolating himself via death will protect himself from future pain. His suicide is an act of self-defense, preemptively saving himself from seemingly inevitable, existential pain.³¹ This experience of self-imposed isolation as a protective measure *against* isolation and loneliness is indeed somewhat cyclical; however, the self-imposition gives a sense of agency to the individual and allows them to take control of their situation and save themselves from (expected) harm, regardless of whether these expectations are grounded in reality.

In the early 2000s, we start to see a turn away from New Queer Cinema. The impact of New Queer Cinema is undeniable, as its influence remains in more modern and mainstream films such as Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016). Yet, overall attitudes carried in queer film began to shift from one of embracing nonconformity to one that is more mainstream; the teen coming-of-age genre especially sees more and more queer films each year, such as *Love, Simon* (2018), *Booksmart* (2019), and *The Half of It* (2020).³² Thomas Bezucha’s *Big Eden* is an early example of this shift. *Big Eden* acknowledges and integrates elements of New Queer Cinema while diverting and

optimistically mapping a future of queer culture; the film challenges heteronormativity by pondering a queer future in which it does not exist at all.

Big Eden was Bezucha's first major film. Both written and directed by Bezucha, the film and its cast won awards at multiple LGBTQ film festivals in 2000 and 2001. *Big Eden* is a romantic drama-comedy about a gay main character, Henry Hart, and his hometown of Big Eden, Montana. Following his grandfather having a stroke, Henry leaves his life in New York City to fly back to Big Eden to care for him. While caring for his only living relative, Henry reunites with old family friends from his youth, who comment that he has not visited in a long time. Being back in his hometown, Henry must grapple with his unresolved feelings for his high school crush, Dean, who has also recently moved back to town after divorcing his wife. Between juggling his feelings for Dean and caretaking for his ill grandfather, Henry is oblivious to the fact that the shy general store owner, Pike, is pining for him. Henry also does his best to conceal that he is gay as he has not yet come out to his grandfather. Much of the humor of the film takes shape around everyone knowing Henry is gay, but not telling him it is something he needs to hide. Henry keeps waiting for homophobic encounters that never come.

The film is notable for the fact that it does not feature any explicit homophobic activity or comments at all; Henry and the audience produce all such expectations. The film plays with assumptions around small, rural town life. As we, the audience, are exposed to Henry's background of having grown up in a tiny town in the middle of Montana, we assume his community will not accept him. Adding to this assumption is Henry's decision to move to New York and his rare visits back home. When Henry does move back, his secrecy around his sexuality implies there is a dangerous reason as to why he will not let himself be known. After Henry has been in Big Eden for months and has started fitting into the community, he decides he is ready to go back to New York. This comes as a shock to the other members of the community and they all protest to him leaving. During a conversation with an old family friend, Grace Cornwell, she asks why he is leaving, to which Henry replies:

I live in New York . . . I'm like a whole person there. You wouldn't even recognize me. I've got a really nice apartment. A really, really, nice apartment. I make a lot of money. I've got friends there. Good friends. They have restaurants there. . . . I've got to go back.³³

Grace, however, is having none of his excuses, and tries to beg him to stay:

You know what they say when you get lost in the woods? If you stay put, stay in one place and don't wander, they'll find you. And I was just hoping you'd let yourself be found this time. I was hoping you'd let us find you. But you keep wandering, and we can't.³⁴

Henry has internalized so much of the rhetoric pushed on queer people. He assumes that queer folks are meant to be isolated and alone. He also assumes that rural areas are inherently more conservative and, as a result, queer people turn to large cities to find solace and refuge once we have moved away from our hometowns. *Big Eden* counters these dominant narratives through a film built on love and acceptance, rejecting the notion that homophobia is in any way a requirement for queer existence or an inherent part of how we tell our stories.

In some ways, *Big Eden* is part of the New Queer Cinema canon; it destabilizes the heteronormativity of the rural landscape and *queers* the small town, effectively taking control of a narrative so often used against queer people. However, the film also signals a turn away from New Queer Cinema attitudes. Through this control of the narrative, it imagines a future in which queer narratives and individuals are allowed to exist and thrive without homophobia. It challenges the conceptualization of queer community as a counterpublic and instead proposes a new form of public in which heteronormative assumptions do not exist. New Queer Cinema was built around the isolation produced by heteronormativity; but *Big Eden* challenges these conceptions, telling us that we can not just imagine better lives, but deserve a life surrounded by love and support—a life that exists in contrast to the isolated ones described in previous New Queer Cinema films.

Conclusion

In considering a future beyond New Queer Cinema, I find myself returning again and again to a line Cheryl says near the end of *The Watermelon Woman*: “[The life of Fae Richards] means hope. It means inspiration. It means possibility.”³⁵ Visualizations of queer narratives provide a platform through which we can explore our own experiences and reimagine the possibilities of what queer existence can look like. Cheryl’s newfound understanding of Fae Richards, a fellow Black lesbian, provides her with a context through which she can better understand and conceptualize herself and her community. New Queer Cinema, as a genre and movement, explores themes of isolation and loneliness because they are realities of queer existence; it is a record of the time and space in which it emerged, but it also continues to expand upon the infinite possibilities of queer representation, experiences, and futurities.

Emboldened by the ongoing AIDS epidemic, political landscape, and newly available filmmaking technologies, queer filmmakers of the 1990s forged a New Queer Cinema canon that challenges not just conventional filmmaking practices, but the heteronormativity of American society as well. Facing both physical and social death, New Queer Cinema

filmmakers unapologetically embraced authenticity by portraying the unfiltered realities of queer life, while also remaining in tension with the heteronormative public that surrounds it.

The isolation and the loneliness that results from this conflict is essential to the New Queer Cinema movement. Gus Van Sant's 1991 film *My Own Private Idaho* explicitly articulates this isolation from heteronormativity through the character of Scott. Scott's allegiance to his father (i.e., his blood family) over Mike (i.e., his chosen family) symbolizes a dedication to the nuclear family structure and reinscription of queer culture's isolation in both material and conceptual ways. Systemic isolation of queer individuals leads to a sense of loneliness and yearning for social connectivity as seen in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*. Dunye's character Cheryl searches for information about the fictional actress Fae Richards, longing for the kinship of fellow Black lesbians. By constructing an archive of Black lesbian existence, Cheryl combats loneliness resulting from historical isolation. Additionally, the isolation experienced by queer people is often so pervasive that it becomes internalized, even when it is unfounded. The character of Andy in Gregg Araki's film *Totally Fucked Up* experiences isolation from heteronormative constructs as well as queer community. This feeling of loneliness serves as the catalyst for his suicide, a seemingly ultimate form of isolation. In a similar vein, the central character of Henry in Thomas Bezucha's film *Big Eden* internalizes the belief that queer individuals are meant to be isolated. While in his rural hometown, Henry tries to remain in the closet despite all his friends and family being supportive. Themes of isolation and loneliness within these films are not just essential to the New Queer Cinema movement, but also reflect lived realities of queer individuals—lives and experiences that challenge heteronormativity.

Where *Big Eden* differs from the rest of these films, however, is that it seeks to dramatically reimagine what queer futures can look like. By not having any linguistic or visual depictions of violence and emphasizing community as a support system for queer characters, *Big Eden* challenges heteronormative assumptions that small, rural spaces are rife with homophobia and only inhabitable by queers if they remain isolated. Rather, the town of Big Eden exists as a community that queers rurality, while suggesting a future—or an alternate version of the present—in which all community members are considered essential and integral to the community's well-being. *Big Eden* serves as a cultural marker for the turn away from New Queer Cinema and provides an alternative, optimistic response to isolation compared to previous New Queer Cinema films.

This article has sought to bridge the gap in research on the intersections between queer identity, cinema, and isolation. Through an analysis of select New Queer Cinema films, I explored the ways isolation and loneliness not only manifest in the genre, but also the way they reflect queer realities. Understanding the relationship between queer life, isolation, and cultural products is vital as queer communities continue to be resilient in the face of

the COVID-19 pandemic and Monkeypox virus. There are many opportunities for future research at the intersection of these themes. The relationship between queer representation in children's media and social connectivity amongst queer youth is a particularly timely topic following an exponential increase in representation and Republican retaliation.³⁶ There is also room to expand upon how the themes of isolation reflect the queer lived experiences in cinematic and literary cultural productions created during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond as we grapple with the fallout. If there is one consideration to take away from any queer work, whether it is film or scholarly research, it is possibility. Queerness itself exists as infinite possibilities as it allows for representations beyond our own experiences. As such, it gestures toward a future defined not by what queerness *does* mean, but what it *can* mean.

Notes

1. José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1. ↩
2. Michele Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3–14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> > ; Monica B. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 23–35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrw2f> > ; B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpp0s> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpp0s> > . ↩
3. Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, xv–xvi. ↩
4. See Joseph Bennington-Castro, "How AIDS Remained an Unspoken—But Deadly—Epidemic for Years," *HISTORY*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan> < <https://www.history.com/news/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan> > for more information on this topic. ↩
5. Pearl, "AIDS and New Queer Cinema," 29. ↩
6. "Heteronormativity" is defined as the belief that heterosexuality is normal and expected; this relates to the ways society conceptualizes constructs such as sexuality, gender, and family. For a thorough definition, see American Psychological Association, "Heteronormativity," in *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/heteronormativity>. ↩
7. Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction." ↩
8. Timothy Gitzen, "Viral Living," *Social Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (May 2020): 271–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12849> < <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12849> > ; Michelle Forrest and Phillip Joy, "Out of the Closet and into Quarantine: Stories of Isolation and Teaching," *Atlantis* 42, no. 1 (September 30, 2021): 31–46, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082014ar> < <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082014ar> > ; Rachel M. Schmitz et al., "Queer Politics of a Pandemic: LGBTQ + People's Conceptions of COVID-19's Politicization," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, April 18, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00719-6> < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00719-6> > ; Sara Paparini et al., "Public Understanding and Awareness of and Response to Monkeypox Virus Outbreak: A Cross-sectional Survey of the Most Affected Communities in the United Kingdom during the 2022 Public Health Emergency," *HIV*

Medicine, November 16, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hiv.13430> <
<https://doi.org/10.1111/hiv.13430>> . ↩

9. Numerous New Queer Cinema films highlight these themes. For instance, isolation from heteronormativity is prevalent in John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) just as queer kinship underscores the character development in Harry Dodge and Silas Howard's *By Hook or by Crook* (2001). Furthermore, self-imposed isolation is a key part of the plot in Michael Mayer's *A Home at the End of the World* (2004). ↩
10. Rob Cover, "Isolated and Suicidal: Critically Assessing the Persistent Stereotype of Queer Youth as Isolated and Lonely on a Pathway to the Big City," in *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, ed. Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 193, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645582-17> <
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315645582-17>> . ↩
11. It is important to note that isolation and loneliness are not mutually exclusive. This article focuses on isolation as a systemic issue, but as it and loneliness have significant overlap, I find it imperative to define both. ↩
12. GLAAD is an organization that protests defamatory media content of LGBTQ people. The acronym originally stood for "Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation," but the organization has since broadened that scope to the wider queer community. ↩
13. Jake Indiana, "Gus Van Sant Reflects on 30 Years of 'My Own Private Idaho,'" *Highsnobiety*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/gus-van-sant-interview-my-own-private-idaho> < <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/gus-van-sant-interview-my-own-private-idaho>> . ↩
14. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 112, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1qgnqj8> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1qgnqj8>> . ↩
15. Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho* (New Line Cinema, 1991), 46:38. ↩
16. Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho*, 47:28. ↩
17. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 73, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074>> . ↩
18. Pendarvis Harshaw, "Reel Talk: Cheryl Dunye on Inventing a Film Genre," *KQED*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13894145/rightnowish-reel-talk-cheryl-dunye> <
<https://www.kqed.org/arts/13894145/rightnowish-reel-talk-cheryl-dunye>> . ↩
19. Cheryl Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman* (Dancing Girl Productions, 1996), 54:45. ↩
20. Dunye, *Watermelon Woman*, 1:12:39. ↩
21. Dunye, *Watermelon Woman*, 1:14:14. ↩
22. J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 169–70. ↩
23. The trilogy is made up of *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997). Eugene Hernandez, "5 Questions for Gregg Araki, Writer/Director of 'Totally Fucked Up,'" *IndieWire* (blog), July 1, 2005, <https://www.indiewire.com/2005/07/5-questions-for-gregg-araki-writerdirector-of-totally-fucked-up-78155> < <https://www.indiewire.com/2005/07/5-questions-for-gregg-araki-writerdirector-of-totally-fucked-up-78155>> . ↩
24. Ryan O'Connell, "The Work of Gregg Araki: Teenagers, Aliens and Shoegaze," *Thought Catalog* (blog), January 31, 2011, <https://thoughtcatalog.com/ryan-oconnell/2011/01/gregg-araki-gay-boys-aliens-and-shoegaze> < <https://thoughtcatalog.com/ryan-oconnell/2011/01/gregg-araki-gay-boys-aliens-and-shoegaze>> . ↩
25. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*. ↩
26. Gregg Araki, *Totally F***ed Up* (Strand Releasing, 1993), 23:53. ↩
27. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 1:16. ↩

28. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 42:21. ↩
 29. Cover, "Isolated and Suicidal," 195. ↩
 30. Araki, *Totally F***ed Up*, 18:15. ↩
 31. I would like to emphasize that this phrasing is not intended to glorify suicide, but rather to situate Andy's own mentality prior to him taking his life. ↩
 32. The increase in representation is a point of contention within the community. Some argue that the increase in representation is positive for the community, while others argue these representations commodify queer identity. Regardless, there has been an increasing number of mainstream queer films. ↩
 33. Thomas Bezucha, *Big Eden* (Wolfe Video, 2000), 01:32:20. ↩
 34. Bezucha, *Big Eden*, 01:32:55. ↩
 35. Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman*, 1:14:14. ↩
 36. For more information, see Deepa Shivaram, "More Republican Leaders Try to Ban Books on Race, LGBTQ Issues," *NPR*, November 13, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/13/1055524205/more-republican-leaders-try-to-ban-books-on-race-lgbtq-issues> < <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/13/1055524205/more-republican-leaders-try-to-ban-books-on-race-lgbtq-issues> > . ↩
-

Author Information



Nathan Burns

Nathan Burns (they/he) is an incoming MA student in Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University. Their research revolves around queer, trans, and disabled life and cultural production, particularly in relationship to community, digital spaces, and popular culture. Nathan has also been named a 2022–23 California State University Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Scholar.

[View all of Nathan Burns's articles.](#)

Article details

Nathan Burns, "'It Means Possibility': Manifestations of Isolation in New Queer Cinema," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.3>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Hearing the *Houma*: Sound, Vision, and Urban Space in Moroccan Hip-Hop Videos

by Ian VanderMeulen | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

ABSTRACT This paper seeks to engage the construction of urban “soundscapes” as a potential flashpoint for class conflict by analyzing auditory and visual representations of “the neighborhood” (al-houma) in a handful of Moroccan hip-hop videos. I begin by situating Moroccan hip-hop within transnationally circulating associations of hip-hop with “urban” life, as well as the political dynamics of North Africa’s colonial and postcolonial urban histories. I then analyze four videos comparatively, suggesting that each goes beyond lyrical and musical content of the songs to construct a sensory experience of the city—or neighborhood—for the listener-viewer. In giving attention to the political implications of each video, however, I argue that what distinguishes each is less what sort of “soundscape” emerges in his video but how each video teaches the audience to “hear” the Houma. While videos by mainstream rappers Muslim and Don Bigg figure urban space as threatening and in need of moral recuperation, they enact these pedagogies largely through indexical figurations of their respective soundscapes, that is, by directing the listener to attend to certain (inaudible) sounds and to interpret them in a certain way. By contrast, a video by El Haqed, known as a more staunchly oppositional figure, visually and sonically constructs a peri-urban lifeworld conditioned by neoliberal economic abandonment yet resistant to the postcolonial gaze. This contrast, I suggest, raises crucial questions about how hip-hop is linked to broader dynamics of cultural appropriation and “resistance” politics.

KEYWORDS media, resistance, urban, hip hop, sound, North Africa, Morocco

From the start, the ‘spirit’ is afflicted with the curse of being ‘burdened’ with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, of sounds, in short of language.

—Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels, *The German Ideology*¹

How do we make “sense” of cities? How are urban landscapes built to fulfill certain aesthetic desires, and how do built environments train our senses in turn? Critical geographers and other post-Marxist theorists have been at the forefront of rethinking

urban space as both cultural construct and site for political engagement, in that its spatiotemporal affordances and constraints circumscribe flows of capital and facilitate or challenge potential class alliances. David Harvey was one of the first to note, in *The Urban Experience* and other works, that urban design is often utilized to promote separation and management of different social groups, thus giving a physical dimensionality to power differentials between labor and capital.² The built environment can provide “storage” for dormant capital, or an easy avenue for recirculation through “redevelopment” projects. In such approaches, the built environments of the city are irreducibly *material*. Building on Raymond Williams’s slightly more expansive concept of “cultural materialism,” however, analyzing cities might also encompass more sensory experiences and contestations of urban life.³ Indeed, the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler—of a decidedly different theoretical orientation than Williams—proposes considering the city *itself* as a “medium” for communication, sensory interaction, and other forms of exchange.⁴

Inspired by such foundational interventions, this paper attempts to amplify sonic constructions of urban space as potential flashpoints of class conflict. As Marx’s “agitated layers of air,” sound is profoundly dual: irreducibly material (as a form of physical vibration) yet, in the sense of *agitation* it evokes, sound also emerges out of cultural contestation —“agitation” by and for whom? Numerous scholars have found this dual quality productive for thinking through the politics of listening and other sensory experiences. For Rowland Atkinson, for example, the material collision of sound waves with the built urban environment means that cities often have their own “sonic ecology.” In this way, sound itself can act as a barrier—such as white noise drowning out unwanted sounds—or as a tool of social engineering—such as “functional music” intended to produce certain behaviors in commercial spaces or the workplace.⁵ Thus, although R. Murray Schafer still serves an important reference for scholars of sound, his original idea of the “soundscape” has been roundly critiqued for its inadequate attention to the politics of such access and social engineering.⁶ Indeed, as one important programmatic essay points out, the concept’s implicit reference to landscape painting and photography belies an inescapable *subjectivity* in all sonic environments—their construction and eventual perception *by* and *for* unequal listeners and communities of hearers. As such, “soundscapes” must be engaged as mediated and temporally constrained environments.⁷

This paper seeks to contribute to such debates, and in particular the mediated and *mediating* qualities of urban soundscapes, by analyzing the sensory construction of urban space in a small selection of recent Moroccan hip-hop videos. Though my broader aim is to open up theoretical opportunities for thinking through the sensory politics of the urban imagination in audiovisual media, I take hip-hop’s enduring—if problematic—associations with “urban” cultural aesthetics, as well as Morocco’s complex urban histories, as productive starting points. The scholarly literature on hip-hop, particularly in the American

context, is rich and vast, rapidly expanding in recent years to include examinations not only of its broader racial, gendered, and class dynamics;⁸ but also specific elements of performance and production, such as the role of the DJ and politics of musical borrowing and remixing.⁹ While a parallel literature on the genre's "globalization" has been uneven, studies of Arabic-language hip-hop and other developments in the Middle East and North Africa/Southwest Asia and North Africa region (hitherto MENA/SWANA) have increasingly directed their critiques at the tendency of transnational media discourses to overdetermine hip-hop as a musical form of political "resistance," a framing that artists themselves routinely struggle with.¹⁰ While this is particularly true in the case of the genre's romanticization during the regional uprisings of 2011, we can hear pre-echoes in David McDonald's study of the rise and evolution of the Palestinian-Israeli group DAM, particularly as the violence and contentiousness of the Second Intifada pushed them to incorporate more elements of a distinctly "Palestinian" musical tradition.¹¹

I would suggest that one way of circumventing these dynamics, at least provisionally, might be to engage the specific histories and aesthetics of urban life and class consciousness that undergird hip-hop production in diverse MENA/SWANA contexts. In Morocco as in the United States, hip-hop arose in the midst of rapid neoliberal reforms that exacerbated class divisions in metropolitan areas, leading to the critiques of authority and inequality that are frequent in rap songs. As Jeffries argues, however, that characterization of rap music as an "urban" genre *par excellence* is a highly problematic one, a critical reflection that is no less relevant to the Moroccan context.¹² In fact, Moroccan class identities have long been forged and contested through articulations with the urban, from the vilification of rural peasants by members of the urban upper class to the French Protectorate's *internal* urban politics of separation to the prominence of the neighborhood (*Ihouma*) as a site of identity-formation. In short, rather than romanticize hip-hop's urban pedigree, I take Morocco's striated urban histories as provocation for investigating how the urban imaginaries of hip-hop videos betray certain class orientations.

Finally, I want to propose that the music video genre itself offers a uniquely sensory interface from which to undertake such an investigation. I employ certain paradigmatic approaches to film sound, particularly Michel Chion's famous concept of the "audio-visual contract," alongside more recent sound studies scholarship that gives critical attention to the challenges of analyzing sound in urban space.¹³ Since "there is no place of the sounds, no auditory scene already preexisting the soundtrack," Chion argues, the "soundtrack" to which the viewer-listener is attuned, and the sense of sonic space it elicits, is the result of a constructed and constructive *audio-visual synthesis*.¹⁴ Moreover, since auditory experience *itself* has the distinguishing ability to "reconfigure space,"¹⁵ space, in all its sonic richness, might be "conceived as plural, as the outcome of social and material practices, and as indivisible from time."¹⁶ In pushing for such spatially oriented analysis of

Moroccan hip-hop videos, however, I intentionally eschew some of Chion's more elaborate sonic taxonomies for a more fluid approach. Instead, while taking the lyrical richness of my examples seriously, I also give focused attention to how other, non-verbal aspects of vocal performance contribute to a sense of "vocalic space" within each video's imagined urban ecology.¹⁷

The paper's interventions are built on a comparative analysis of two pairs of music videos. After situating the "first generation" of Moroccan rappers within a broader context of the country's musical and urban histories, I compare a video by international pop sensation Ahmed Chawki to a recent video by the rapper known as Muslim, to draw out stark contrasts in the type of urban "soundscape" such hip-hop videos construct. Subsequent videos by Don Bigg and El Haqed, the latter a favorite of the February 20, 2011 Movement, seem to reorient urban space and reimagine town and country relations, respectively. Considered comparatively, what sets El Haqed apart from the other two rappers, I argue, is less *what* sort of "soundscape" emerges in his video but *how*, and the different types of political "work" each video performs as a result. The videos by Muslim and Don Bigg figure urban space as threatening and in need of recuperation through *personal* responsibility and intervention—a pedagogical orientation that links neoliberal ideologies with state agendas of urban "renewal."

These videos also enact such pedagogies, largely through *indexical* figurations of their respective soundscapes. What I mean by this is that the audio-visual contract of their videos *directs* the listener to attend to certain (inaudible) sounds and to interpret them in a certain way. El Haqed, by contrast, visually and sonically constructs a peri-urban lifeworld conditioned by neoliberal economic *abandonment* yet resistant to the postcolonial gaze. In short, the different politics and class orientations of each video are firmly rooted in the very ways they teach us to "hear" the *houma*. I conclude by suggesting that El Haqed's effort to reconstruct a marginalized urban soundscape that is nonetheless *not* immediately legible as a form of "resistance" politics challenges scholars of hip-hop to rethink *other* ways the genre might be meaningful to practitioners and urban residents.

Making Hip-Hop Moroccan

Although hip-hop arrived in Morocco through cultural imports from France and the United States, the genre has been shaped significantly by existing local musical trends, in addition to longstanding and intersecting contestations over class identity and the partitioning of urban and rural spaces. Although this divide has roots in precolonial governance, which the Moroccan Sultanate conceived of through an opposition between an urbanite "territory of the state" (*bled al-makhzen*) and rural/mountainous "territory of resistance" (*bled al-siba*),

it is hard to argue against the exacerbating effects of the French Protectorate, established in 1912.¹⁸ The Protectorate's "ideological foundations," Alessandra Ciucci argues, "rested in part upon a representation of Morocco as divided between city and countryside," an assumption built upon both precolonial governance ideologies as well as problematic translations of the fourteenth-century polymath Ibn Khaldun.¹⁹ Moreover, since French colonial policy had by 1912 shifted from an agenda of assimilation to one aimed at the "preservation" of local cultures, the Protectorate sought to divide urban geographies *internally* as well, a practice of "urban apartheid" that cordoned off "traditional" urban networks and cultural heritage sites from modern development schemes in the "new" cities.²⁰

Building on such colonial legacies, Morocco's post-Independence politics have been characterized by struggles over the relations between city and rural communities, as well as who has a "right to the city." In the wake of independence, during the post-colonial monarchy's state-led development programs, urban centers like Casablanca witnessed explosive internal immigration, with elite condescension toward rural populations now directed toward these new urban masses. The 1962 ascent of King Hassan II, and assertion of a new constitution that turned the nationalist Istiqlal into a permanent opposition party, provoked a new wave of student and labor organizing on the left.²¹ A "new pop music" began to emerge during this period led by Nass al-Ghiwane, whose members hailed primarily from the lower-class Hay Mouhamedi neighborhood in Casablanca.²² Their use of *darija*, the Arabic dialect of Morocco; references to traditional oral poetry known as *malhoun*; and incorporation of idioms from folk songs, Berber music, and the Gnawa native to sub-Saharan Africa immediately set them apart. Their subtle, politically subversive lyrics also served to inspire opposition movements even as Hassan II's regime responded with increasing violence, forced disappearances, and torture in secretive prisons—a period (1975–1990) known as the "Years of Lead."²³ Younger generations of Moroccans are still familiar with Nass al-Ghiwane's songs, which provided important political, if not musical, inspiration for the first generation of Moroccan rappers looking to root their music in local references and traditions.

An additional legacy of the French Protectorate's politics of separation has been the re-emergence of "the neighborhood" (*lhouma*, or *al-hawma* in classical Arabic), as a site of affiliation and source of identity construction. Of course, the genealogy of *lhouma* may not be strictly "colonial": Julia Clancy-Smith highlights the importance of affiliation based on *al-hawma* within the "cultural creole" atmosphere of nineteenth-century Tunis.²⁴ Yet Abu-Lughod also suggests that due to the Protectorate's "neglect" of urban upkeep, "neighborhoods handled many of their internal functions on a more ad hoc basis," thus presumably fostering highly localized social connections.²⁵ Alternatively glossed in colloquial Arabic as *al-zanka* ("the street" or "alley"), or even in French as *lboulevard*,²⁶

ideas of the neighborhood continue to hold sway in many North African urban centers, organizing a (predominantly male) space of commerce and sociality separated from its supposedly hostile neighbors.²⁷

Grappling with such historical legacies in the here-and-now, Moroccan hip-hop artists characterize life in *lhouma* as burdened with daily struggle. A popular example from the group H-Kayne, titled, simply “L’houma,” laments the impoverishment of the urban poor, and the social ills that come along with such blight:

In the neighborhood
I will tell you what’s going on
In the neighborhood there is everything
There are those who are unemployed
And those who struggle to make ends meet...

After dropping a reference to Nass El-Ghiwane, the second verse continues:

Open your ears
Stop idling around the neighborhood
Stop smoking and sniffing.²⁸

Here the listener is urged to take responsibility and control of his own life, urged to “open your ears” and improve the neighborhood himself by quitting drugs. The lyrics of the song thus walk a fine line between acknowledging the problems of life in the urban slums and encouraging a subjectivity of modern citizenship where individuals take responsibility.

In the wake of structural adjustments of the 1980s and 1990s, the shift from Nass El-Ghiwane’s more direct criticisms of the monarchy’s oppressive politics to an emphasis on personal responsibility reflects a neoliberal ideology that dovetails with the regime’s recent policy of cautious, top-down liberalization. Following his ascent to the throne in 1999, the current King Mohammed VI sought to increase state support for cultural productions—particularly of formerly marginalized cultural forms like Berber and Gnawa musical traditions—as part of a distinct move away from the “Years of Lead” associated with his father. Especially after the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, the state began to see hip-hop as a way of steering urban youth away from Islamic extremism and other violent countercultures, and thus hip-hop festivals began to emerge as an important node in the *makhzen*’s matrix of cultural production. Like Nass al-Ghiwane before them, the hip-hop artists who are imbricated in this matrix take up vital social problems in their music and are often critical of authorities. As Kendra Salois argues, however, their lyrics and “stage talk” cast such problems in subjective terms, citing the personal responsibility of each individual citizen to help solve the problems he or she faces.²⁹

Another cornerstone of Muhammad VI's supposed moderation has been a performative display of support for women's rights, particularly in the form of revisions to the "Personal Status Code" (*mudawwana*) that regulates marriage and family law. This shapes the spaces within which female hip-hop artists like Soultana, another member of the so-called "first generation" of Moroccan rappers, must operate. The title of Soultana's song "Sawt Nssa'" ("Women's Voice") seems at first glance to play into post-9/11 transnational tropes about the "liberation" of women in Muslim societies but in fact takes a common object of conservative Moroccan moral panic, the prostitute, and turns the usual power dynamic on its head, telling the story of the "street girl" (*bint al-zanqa*) from her perspective.³⁰ The song has no official video, and numerous fan videos have been purged from YouTube by authorities.³¹ As Salois points out, however, Soultana's political interjection follows a rhetoric similar to that of her peers H-Kayne and Bigg. Soultana makes this position explicit in an interview with Dutch video journalist Margo De Haas. Acknowledging the legitimacy of the recent political unrest in Morocco, she argues that

Fifty percent, it's a problem of the government, and fifty percent it's the problem of the people because the people need to cultivate themselves, they need to educate themselves. And I think if you can change just a little bit of your entourage, maybe that entourage will change the world.³²

Though paralleling H-Kayne's emphasis on personal responsibility, Soultana's statement speaks implicitly to the challenges artists of such a globalized musical form face in positioning their *local* political critiques within transnational, neoliberalizing discourses.

In addition to such transnational geopolitics, Moroccan hip-hop artists must negotiate other aspects of the state's ambiguously liberalizing policies. Some scholars, for example, have suggested that previously-subversive musical genres like Gnawa and hip-hop have now become subject to larger process of "festivalization" that repackage local performance cultures for elite and transnational consumption while linking them to postcolonial forms of audiovisual surveillance.³³ Using the Fez Festival of Sacred Music as an example, Taieb Belghazi argues that such state-sponsored, transnationally oriented festivals serve as "a meta-statement about the social order" through which "the city presents a selective version of its material counterpart."³⁴ If large-scale urban "development" projects and the recuperation of urban "slums" have both become sites for the retrenchment of authoritarian governance, it is important to question which urban populations such "festivalizations" are intended to serve.³⁵ Put differently, if H-Kayne is urging listeners to "open your ears" to *lhouma*, thus framing the neighborhood as a space of *sonic* and other *sensory* interaction, to whose "selective version" of the city are we listening? How do hip-hop videos frame that aural relation for us, and to what political ends? The remainder of the paper takes up H-Kayne's injunction as an analytical mode, shifting away from lyrical analysis to consider in more detail how a small sampling of more

recent music videos not only constructs *Ihouma* sensorially, but in doing so suggest different ethics of *hearing Ihouma* that are contested across class identities.

Neighborhood Vibes: Audio-Visual Constructions of *I-Houma*

Building on the success of artists like H-Kayne and Soultana, the early 2000s ushered in a new generation of hip-hop artists committed to rapping in the local Arabic dialect of *darija*, backed in many cases by much more sophisticated production aesthetics and more elaborate video sets. Mohamed Mezouri, for example, known by the stage name Muslim, and his contemporary Don Bigg (examined in the next section) best represent this trend. Their videos regularly garner several million views on YouTube with viewer comments primarily in *darija*—sometimes in Arabic script, sometimes transliterated in Latin characters—mirroring the lyrical content of the songs and suggesting a predominantly Moroccan public. Although at times critical of the Moroccan state's security apparatus and other forms of class dominance, many of their videos rework H-Kayne's rhetoric of social responsibility into audiovisual representation. As the production quality of such videos has converged with the standards of transnational pop, a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward urban lifeworlds has emerged in hip-hop videos.

To set up the aesthetics and political stakes of this contrast, it might be helpful to first consider a similar audio-visual construction of urban space from the Moroccan international pop sensation Ahmed Chawki. The Tétouan native is known for a number of international hits, including a 2015 remix of Dr. Alban's early '90s hit "It's My Life" and the 2013 crossover smash "Habibi, I Love You," featuring Cuban-American rap sensation Pitbull. Both videos are dripping with opulence: Chawki can be seen strolling by the pool of a modernist, glass-walled mansion, or dancing on the foredeck of a large powerboat surrounded by bikini-clad models. Such deterritorialized scenes of international luxury give subtle endorsement to the Moroccan state's increasingly neoliberal economic policies. The video for "Tsunami," however, performs a different neoliberal aesthetic, offering up a sensory reconstruction of Marrakech that draws on local cultural references repackaged for tourist consumption.

In the video for "Tsunami," Chawki's producers spend several long seconds orienting audiences sonically rather than visually. The video opens with just over a second of blackness, accompanied by a soft scraping sound. The opening image reveals the source of the scraping: a cart carrying a speaker is dragged across the brick pavement, the sound coming from the small plastic wheels. A second shot gives a brief glimpse of market-style tents, of unidentified human activity. Vaguely comprehensible verbal exchanges filter into

our auditory field from all directions—the video limits visual engagement in an attempt at sonic immersion. Suddenly, the camera cuts to an image overhead, revealing Marrakech’s famous Jam’a al-Fna square, drenched in sunlight yet not overly crowded, with Chawki in the center of the frame, dragging his PA system. More sounds are accompanied by their visual referents: a dreadlocked man on a unicycle juggles torches crackling with fire; an older man in *jelaba* blows a few notes on a reed instrument; a jingling bell is revealed to belong to an elderly man in a colorful Berber hat. A quick shot of the square overhead is followed by the sounds and visuals of the PA turning on—a click, a buzz, a quick tap on the microphone (0:23).

The song begins with a bell-like synthesizer playing a minor key melody that foreshadows the song’s verse, backed only by soft synthesizer pads (0:30). The camera watches Chawki from overhead as he steps to the microphone, an act that within the video narrative seems to attract a diverse cast of listeners, from men in *jellabas* to blonde women in tank tops. Some squint, point, or move toward the center of the square. The aural and visual narrative of the film thus follows what Brian Larkin claims to be one of the sound system’s most interesting aspects, namely its tendency to draw attention to itself.³⁶ All at once (0:45), the camera centers Chawki, a heavier synthesizer beat drops in, and Chawki belts out the song’s first chorus. Equally important, the seemingly quotidian street sounds are suddenly silenced to make way for the highly polished, recorded track. The camera angle alternates between the overhead shot and one parallel with Chawki and his audience. From overhead we see throngs of people begin to circle around Chawki, clapping to the beat. Two different reed players from the opening seconds of the video are shown miming along to a reed melody on the recorded track. Thus, despite the lack of street sounds and heavy polish of the track, the video nonetheless evokes a “local” soundscape through indexical aural-visual pairing. Toward the end of the second chorus (1:52) of “Tsunami” another sound is added to the video’s audio track: the flapping blades of a helicopter, soon seen circling above. The camera cuts to the view from the helicopter, then a close-up on a man hanging out the window, who reports (in English): “Live from Morocco! Live from Marrakech! What’s going on here? Ahmed Chawki’s going crazy! It’s tsunami love.”

However, while the voice from the helicopter might be intended to index the sounds and speech acts of news production, I would suggest it can be listened to “against the grain” as a more subtle reinforcement of the video’s surveillance aesthetics. Surveillance of urban space of course has deep colonial legacies as well, as the need for easy visualization and movement of military forces motivated many of the city planning techniques that Abu-Lughod identifies in the Protectorate’s “urban apartheid.” Although the histories of port cities like Rabat and Casablanca do not necessarily apply directly to Marrakech, the video still performs this type of surveillance in a more contemporary mode, repeatedly interspersing “ground-level” shots with views from overhead, some explicitly framed to

situate the viewer's perspective *in* the helicopter. Moreover, this surveillance perspective is extended sonically, as the static-drenched voice of the man in the helicopter might just as easily be heard as a *voice* of surveillance. The rapper Don Bigg's song "16/04," for example, dramatizes a conversation between a security officer and one of the 2003 Casablanca bombers, employing static to present the voice of the officer as technologically mediated.³⁷ The visual and aural effect of Chawki's video thus demonstrates the affinity between an aesthetic of "festivalization" and the forms of technological surveillance that allow the state and other elite actors to organize urban space according to its logics.

Music video for Ahmed Chawki's 'Tsunami'

Although scholars suggest that such "festivalization" has helped propel hip-hop's popularization in Morocco, videos of the rapper Muslim organize urban space quite differently. Signed to Kachela Records, the Tangier native is by far the label's best-selling artist, outpacing other notable rappers with transnational followings like L'Arabe and Mojahid. In an interview on the Moroccan talk-show "Rachid," Muslim tells the audience and host Rachid Allali about his musical background and his introduction to rap, which came through trips to New York City and other cosmopolitan centers of hip-hop culture. In doing so, Muslim foregrounds a different transnational identity than Chawki, one linked to the "origin myth" of hip-hop that is central to the production of "local" hip-hop movements even as they situate the genre's origins "elsewhere."³⁸ The videos for songs like "Al-Rissala" ("The Message") and "L'Marhoum" ("The Dead") are dense with iconographic indicators of urban space like city rooftops and graffiti-covered walls. Such symbolic references present a grittier, more "underground" sense of urban space than Chawki's Marrakech but one that is simultaneously deterritorialized, evoking a vague sense of

lhouma without making overt reference to Morocco. In other words, while Chawki's "Tsunami" constructs a multicultural vision of Marrakech as a *specific* urban locality, Muslim offers up a *generalized* cityscape whose iconic references nonetheless carry *specific* resonance within a different transnational musical network.

The video for Muslim's "Dmou3 L7awma," ("Tears of the Neighborhood"), constructs a similarly "delocalized" sense of urban space, in part through various indexical audio-visual crossovers that *teach* the listener-viewer *how* to "open their ears."³⁹ Directed by Mehdi El Hachimi, the video's reception on YouTube attests to Muslim's popularity, having garnered over four million views in the first four months after its posting in January 2016, now exceeding a staggering 45.5 million plays.⁴⁰ The song opens with a soft, plodding, echo-drenched electronic drum track with a minor key synthesizer melody rising in pitch to the opening verse. The establishing shot pans over a mass of densely crowded buildings which, though vaguely reminiscent of Muslim's hometown of Tangier, give little other sense of locality. In the next frame a prepubescent boy in a dirty sweat suit enters dejectedly, taking a seat in a corner surrounded by peeling, white-washed walls. Next, a spray-painted English translation of the song's title as "Tears of the Hood" appears on another wall, which subsequently becomes a backdrop for Muslim's mimetic vocal performances throughout the video. "How do you want to begin?" Muslim raps, backed by decrepit concrete architecture. "How do you want me to keep silent while the neighborhood is dying (*l-houma katmout*)?"⁴¹ Even before the video's visual narrative gets underway, the neighborhood is presented as an uninviting place, dark, dirty, and cramped, while the muted drum-and-synthesizer track contributes a quiet sense of foreboding.

Watching "Dmou3 L7ouma" alongside Chawki's "Tsunami" video, which YouTube seems to suggest we could, produces a number of stark contrasts.⁴² In costuming, physical setting, and lighting, Chawki's Marrakech is bright and colorful while Muslim's Tangier is bleak. While "Tsunami" depicts Marrakech as open and sunny, with a diverse range of people, Muslim's *houma* is foreboding, with dark alleyways and decrepit buildings guarded by greedy gatekeepers. Even the overhead shots in each video, which give us the view of De Certeau's "voyeur-god,"⁴³ offer contrasting images of urban space—the sunny and open Marrakech versus the jumble of whitewashed houses that we see in "Dmou3 L7ouma." The sonic contrast is equally stark. Marrakech is full of lively voices, "traditional" instruments, and—when the music starts—joyous clapping. Muslim's neighborhood is infused with the sounds of human and animal violence and weeping so ubiquitous that residents become numb to its meaning. Meanwhile, the recurring visual appearance of the song's title in English situates the song's narrative and video's urban representations within transnational hip-hop discourses on "the hood" and the struggles of its residents.

As the song progresses, "The 'Hood" emerges as an increasingly violent presence both visually and aurally. A man with a "Cash Money" sweatshirt blocks a woman from entering an apartment in the neighborhood and seizes her purse (0:55), the lyrics framing this act as a pimp taking his cut from a "girl of the streets." The viscosity of his "guard dog"-like role is mimicked in subsequent frames by a salivating Rottweiler barking in time to the music, vocalized on the track by shouted male background vocals (1:07; 1:10). Just as critics of "the voice" in anthropology and ethnomusicology have noted its seeming location at the boundary of human politics and non-human soundings, here the "crossing" of human and animal vocalities foregrounds the danger of the *l-houma's* sonic ecology over any sort of communicative relationship.⁴⁴ Rather than bursting forth with energy like a typical pop chorus, the "Dmou3 L7ouma" chorus (1:19) eliminates the electronic snare and cymbals from the verse, leaving only a simple bassline and bass-drum beat with heavily-muted equalization. The camera returns to the bird's-eye view of the crowded neighborhood, then cuts to a dark alley while Muslim's rapping retreats into a plaintive lament:

Tears of the neighborhood stream down...
I hear its weeping (*bakiya*) because it seizes my imagination (*khiyali*).

The sudden drop in the intensity of the backing track mimics the neighborhood's weeping. Muslim repeats the lyrics in a more urgent, imploring manner during the second half of the chorus, which reintroduces the heavier beat and imposing synthesizer track. Muslim does not "hear" these tears in a physical sense, however, nor are they, as seems to be the implication, "audible" socially—they emerge only in Muslim's imagination. As Revill points out, "Though sounds and particularly those sounds coded as voices worthy of attention are often diffuse and pervasive, [they] provide points of active, focused listening."⁴⁵ Here, however, although Muslim is foregrounding the "voices" of victims of urban blight as "worthy of attention," he is doing so *indexically*: we do not "hear" tears *in* the video, but are invited to *imagine* them just like Muslim. As such, the indexing of tears draws us less into an *experience* of urban life, and more into a certain pedagogical orientation—that is, a *mode* of listening to *lhouma*.

The verse that follows (1:50) reinforces this audile relationship. Muslim begins each line with the phrase "The neighborhood weeps for a son," transforming the act of weeping into one that is both collective and frequent (in its repetition). The sound of weeping thus changes register from what Schafer calls a "signal noise"—one that carries meaning by drawing attention to a particular object or event—into a "keynote" sound, one that is perceived unconsciously yet "forms a background against which all other sounds are perceived."⁴⁶ This shift has important political implications, however: as an accepted aspect of one's sonic "background," "keynote" sounds are rarely attended to as objects of political concern or reparation. Muslim is in effect trying to reverse this. When the song drops back into the softer, more melancholic chorus a second time (2:52), this weeping is

dramatized visually: the camera pans from an ambulance's flashing lights, which index the sound of the accompanying siren, to a veiled middle-aged woman surrounded by a comforting crowd weeping over her dead son. Here, the video shifts from the "tears of the hood" heard only in *Muslim's* imagination (as in the first chorus), to an invitation to the video's *audience* to "hear" those tears, now indexed visually by the (silent) mother on the screen.

Music video for Muslim's 'Dmou3 L7ouma'

This progression suggests an important point about the *pedagogical* implications of Muslim's song and video. The video works through the distinctly "intersensorial" way in which most people comprehend not just urban space, but even sound as a seemingly isolated phenomenon. As Steve Connor suggests in a brief historical essay on the origins of the telephone "the senses are multiply related; we rarely if ever apprehend the world through one sense alone."⁴⁷ The point then, as Connor argues further, is not simply to *identify* such intersensorial relations, but also to excavate *how* the different senses are related under particular conditions. "Relations between sound and sight may be said to be largely indexical," he says, meaning that "sight often acts to interpret, fix, limit, and complete the evidence of sound."⁴⁸ The Dmou3 L7awma video is fecund with such audio-visual convergences, from the mimetic vocalization of guard dogs acting as a sonic barrier to the "hood," to lyrical and visual indexing of individual and collective "tears." However, the juxtaposition of the crying mother in the second chorus and the (disembodied) repeated crying in the verse before introduces a tension: on the one hand, the weeping is an embodied response to real lives lost; on the other, the ubiquity of the sound of weeping threatens to turn it into a mere "keynote," a sound that recedes into the general din of

urban life. Therefore, the shift from Muslim's imagination to that of the audience performs an important pedagogical task of turning the responsibility of making such weeping "heard" back on the viewer-listener.

Muslim's objective, then, is to breach collective inattention and to motivate listeners to change their beleaguered society. In an interview with the English-language news site *All Africa*, Muslim frames the "message" of his aptly-titled album *Al-Rissala* as a call "to revolt against anything negative in our lives, or anything that can have negative psychological effects." Asked about "the best and worst traits of young people," Muslim cites "their creative potential" on the one hand and "their despair or pessimism" on the other.⁴⁹ Sounds of distress like the sirens and a mother's weeping remain silent against Muslim's recorded track, their visual presence reminding listeners, as in the H-Kayne lyric, to "open their ears." The soundscape of the "Dmou3 L7ouma" video thus performs a similar function as rappers' "stage talk" in live performance, beckoning to fans to "listen" (*isma'*) to their urban surroundings. Kendra Salois argues that the way rappers harness such stage talk to injunctions to take personal responsibility for correcting social ills legitimizes the neoliberal ideologies that underpin the Moroccan state's recent shift in economic policy.⁵⁰ But while "stage talk" may be one technique through which hip-hop artists engage a listener's moral sensibility, here I want to argue that it is precisely Dmou3 L7awma's *indexical* construction of an urban "soundscape" that *teaches the listener how* to "open their ears." Since the "tears of the hood" are not made physically audible in the song's recorded track, their visual indexing forces us to attune to *what they might* sound like—that is, to render the inaudible "audible" through our own responsive listening.

Contested Soundscapes: "Voicing" Dissent and Resisting "Festivalization"

The widespread "Arab Spring" uprisings of 2011 that swept across the MENA/SWANA region changed the politics of hip-hop somewhat, elevating the voices of local rappers as political dissidents yet also rendering the genre subject to romanticization in global media discourse and, in some cases, cooptation by statist and other elite actors. Across those countries that experienced massive protests, local youth and foreign pundits alike rallied behind "revolutionary" artists like Tunisian rapper El General, whose arrest by the Ben Ali regime's security forces following the release of "Rais Lebled" amplified that song as the seeming anthem of the Tunisian uprising. As Rayya El Zein points out, however, the tendency of global media to romanticize the power of El General's music and message recycles orientalist tropes. "The Arab rapper 'speaking truth to power' is an exciting, suddenly modern figure when imagined as emerging from out of the dust, backwardness, and oppression that is otherwise understood to characterize the Middle East and its

politics.”⁵¹ Working in the context of early 2000s and 2010s Senegal, Catherine Appert offers a similar critique, arguing that reducing hip-hop’s social function to one of political “resistance” elides *other* important ways in which the genre is made meaningful in the lives of practitioners and audiences.⁵²

Given the different legacy of the “Arab Spring” in Morocco compared with places like Egypt and Tunisia, however, the general idea of “resistance” and its association with different hip-hop trends is differently configured. Although the monarchy and its security apparatus, known collectively as the *makhzen*, seemed to diffuse the initial wave of local anti-regime protests, self-identified as the February 20 movement, with modest constitutional reforms, many Moroccans continued to voice dissent through mass protests and citizen journalism outlets like *Mamfakinch* (roughly translatable as “No Concessions”). It should come as no surprise, therefore, to see hip-hop break along similar political lines, with some rappers extending appeals to the mass public to improve their urban lifestyles through ethical listening, while others have taken a more direct approach to criticizing the existing regime, even after the 2011 reforms.

One notable example of this trend comes from Don Bigg, one of the “first generation” of rappers, featured in the *I Love Hip Hop in Morocco* festival and documentary that included H-Kayne, Muslim, and Soultana. To be sure, while some of Don Bigg’s songs take up similar pedagogies of urban uplift as evident in the works of Muslim and H-Kayne, others take a much more critical tone toward the abuses of the state and its security apparatus, even if they avoid the taboo of criticizing the monarchy directly. Bigg’s aforementioned song “16/05,” for example, from his 2009 album *White and Black (Bayd u K7al)*, comments on the 2003 bombings of three Casablanca hotels that left forty-five dead and dozens more injured by humanizing the bombers as victims of economic abandonment. After a brief intro featuring a static-drenched imaginary radio exchange between state security officers and one of the bombers, Bigg ventriloquizes the voice of one of the bombers, rapping about experiences of economic and political abandonment.⁵³ The video for Bigg’s song “I Don’t Want It” (*Mabgitch*), meanwhile, released in the aftermath of February 20, 2011, splices images of sexual and moral depravity with overt visual references to imprisonment and state-inflicted torture.⁵⁴ Both tracks therefore call out the state for its combined abandonment and securitization of Morocco’s urban poor. Even if its critique of the neoliberal order in the “voice” of the bomber is merely implicit, “16/05” does suggest that someone *besides* the city’s impoverished are at fault for their condition, and in that provides a contrast to the works of H-Kayne and Muslim.

The video for Don Bigg’s track “TJR,” however, offers a very different commentary on the politics of urban living, in part by shifting its main point of reference to the rural countryside as a source of urban renewal—a reversal of certain colonial and postcolonial politics.

Directed by Sebastien Rossi and featuring the Moroccan-French singer Ahmed Soultan, the video garnered roughly 2.6 million views on YouTube in just over a year, now standing at more than six million.⁵⁵ The visual opening is strikingly ostentatious for such an at-times subversive artist, zooming in from a bird's eye view onto a cluster of Casablanca's luxury high-rises, which dwarf the otherwise-massive Hassan II Mosque in the distance. The camera enters the penthouse balcony of one such building, where Bigg is talking agitatedly on the phone. We follow the rapper inside as he concludes the conversation, hangs up, and beckons to his young son to leave. We next see them in an old red sedan, driving out into the country as a solo piano fades in, playing a medium-tempo minor-key vamp with chromatic inflection. So far, the visual construction of the city is the elevated, "voyeur-God" view of the urban planner,⁵⁶ depicting a decidedly affluent way of life. On that surface level, at least, Bigg's is a much more objectifying depiction of the city, eschewing any direct engagement with *Ihouma* as a countercultural space at all. Meanwhile, the lengthy car scene and musical introduction suggest a sense of separation and *distance* between city and countryside.

As Bigg slides into rapping the first verse, he and Soultan are shown out in a field. The beat of the song is up-tempo, Bigg's raspy, throaty vocalizations juxtaposed with Soultan's crooner-esque, almost whispered, melodic choruses. Clips of the two performers are interspersed with scenes of rural hardship and poverty. We enter the scene of a woman giving birth, lying on a worn mattress on the floor of a plain hut. While Bigg's lyrics up until this point suggest he is a distant descendant of the woman being depicted, the opacity of the lyrics and pronoun usage makes the exact relationship unclear. The suffering on her face is palpable but we quickly cut to one of even greater emotional tension. An older woman, either the midwife or new grandmother (or both) lets out the familiar trill that often hails new beginnings like births and marriages (1:54). As with the weeping in Muslim's video, however, we "hear" this call indexically: though silent behind Bigg's recorded track, the slow-motion movement of the older woman's mouth—tongue lightly flicking teeth and lips, hand cupped around for amplification—evokes the well-known sound in the viewer's mind. Other visual cues invest the performance with added emotional weight: the older woman's strained look makes palpable an ambivalence between the joy of new life, on the one hand, and on the other, the anxiety of not knowing whether the young mother will survive her child's birth—a matter that will be resolved tragically by video's end.

The rest of the video proceeds through two parallel father-son visual narratives, featuring the father from the earlier birth scene cut with shots of Bigg and his own son. The imagery, most of it in slow motion, evokes pastoralism and cultural authenticity: Bigg and his son pray together in the village's humble mosque; a cloaked man reading Qur'an pulls back his hood to reveal Ahmed Soultan's face. As the song draws to a close (4:52), Bigg and his son stroll through the cemetery. Father and son stop at one grave in particular as the rhythm

track fades out. Bigg looks at his son, points to the grave, and then upward, suggesting the family member's *return* to the divine. As the background vocals on the track ascend and begin to trail off, however, the camera seems to *follow* Bigg's direction, panning over the graveyard and bringing the neighborhood mosque into frame. At this moment, Bigg's gesture seems to converge with the camera's visualization of the mosque to indicate something else: the Islamic call-to-prayer, or *adhan*, is sounding. The sound, once again unheard except in the viewer's imagination, provides a sonic counterpoint to the earlier images of religious practice.

The video's aural and visual narrative thus recapitulates Schafer's moralistic critique of the decline of "hi-fi" soundscapes associated with rural life into "lo-fi" urban cacophony. The video itself seems to perform this critique through indexical sonic ordering: by incorporating "unheard" sounds such as the mosque and the midwife's trilling into the viewer-listeners *imagined* soundscape, the producers of the video, like those of Muslim's "Dmou3 L7ouma," actually expand the sonic richness of the video beyond what is strictly included in the musical track. This sonic richness, accompanied by scenes of rural life, suggests a shift "back" to a "hi-fi" soundscape of life outside the city, one where the sounds of birth and the *adhan* are not only still heard but also still carry meaning. Thus, while "Dmou3 L7ouma" urges listeners to take responsibility for improving urban life by *opening* their ears to its sounds, Bigg's video offers a retreat to the countryside and its culturally "authentic" soundscape as a form of moral uplift.

In contrast to the “festivalization” of some of Morocco’s hip-hop pioneers, other rappers gave voice to ongoing post-2011 dissent. One of the most outspoken members of this movement, Mouad Belghouat, rapping under the name El Haqed (“The Indignant”), served three separate jail terms spanning 2011 to 2015 for his fairly direct criticism of the *makhzen* in songs like “Dogs of the State” (*Klab al-Dawla*) and “No More Silence” (*Baraka Men Skat*).⁵⁷ Though the language of international reporting on El-Haqed suggests that he is no less subject to a romanticized resistance narrative, the rapper’s antagonistic relationship with the regime has only strengthened his reputation, expressed by fans in various online fora, as an artist who avoids “whitewashing” or “sugarcoating” the experiences of Morocco’s urban poor. With this political context in mind, this final analytical section of the paper will focus on the video for El-Haqed’s song “Walou,” meaning “Nothing.” Although “Dogs of the State” and “No More Silence” may offer more politically charged lyrical content, I hope to show that “Walou” cuts a more striking contrast to artists like Muslim and Don Bigg by actually refusing the “festivalization” impulses of the Moroccan state and cultural elites in much subtler terms.

The official video for “Walou” delays the beginning of the song itself a full minute, allowing time for a range of non-musical sounds to orient the viewer-listener in a particular, ambiguously urban space.⁵⁸ In the video’s opening seconds the camera seems to struggle to come into focus, foregrounding sound in the viewer’s experience. A song plays in the background, highly compressed and distorted, evoking the sound of a cheap radio. Two or three motorbikes seem to whiz by, panning stereophonically from one ear to another. These “keynotes,” extracted from their actual setting, in fact act as signals that begin to orient the viewer-listener in a particular sonic environment. The camera, in a washed out gray, finally comes into focus on an abandoned lot next to a plain concrete slab building. Clotheslines are strung across the open space, which is also littered with trash. The abandoned lot and piles of trash materialize the waste of capitalist over-production and consumption. The landscape has neither the visual appeal of Chawki’s Marrakech nor the assaultive presence of Muslim’s *houmas* of Tangier. The visual and aural landscape that emerges is instead that of Casablanca’s impoverished, peri-urban periphery—a space that has been subject to cinematic tropes linking such economic abandonment to moral degeneracy. The well-known French-Moroccan director Nabil Ayouch, for example, who burst onto the international film scene by depicting that lifeworld in *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (2000), returned to the subject in 2012 with *Horses of God*, a fictionalized retelling of the upbringing and religious radicalization of the 2003 Casablanca bombers. In that film, characters evoke “the city” (*al-madina*)—never explicitly named as Casablanca—as a space of both economic opportunity as well as moral and political corruption.

The opening framing of “Walou” seems to hint at a similar rhetoric of personal moral responsibility as found in the music of Muslim, Soultana, and H-Kayne. A quote from El

Haqed appears on the screen (0:15): "If you are someone who has a weak intellect (*al-'uqul al-da'ifa*) or are among those who flee from reality . . . Your mind is a prison . . ." However, as the text of El Haqed's message fades from the screen, a number of visual and aural queues begin to lead us into a more distinctly urban space (0:23). As the song continues to play from the cheap radio, a rooster struts across the brick pavement. Children's voices sound from multiple directions, echoing through the narrow, reverberant alleys of the medina. The camera gets into the face of three men in one of these alleyways, each of them insisting, repetitively, "There's nothing here, nothing" (*ma kayn walou*). As the three men retreat, their refrain of "walou" fades into the song's recorded track and El Haqed's own voice, accompanied by a shot of the rapper on a city bus (1:02). The song's rhythm track is much more reserved than Muslim's "Dmou3 L7ouma," featuring a tighter drum beat, sparse bassline, and samples of light, bell-like organ and muted funk guitar lines.

El Haqed's rapping often lags slightly behind the beat, evoking the forced leisure of unemployment. There is no chorus to speak of, or discernable structure to the song in general, though frequent repetitions of "walou" anchor the song in a sort of lyrical mantra. El Haqed's wordplay is skillful, occasionally shifting other line-ending vowels into an "ou" sound to rhyme with a subsequent interjection of "walou." The vocal tracking, meanwhile, reproduces the scattered children's shouts of the video's introduction: although El Haqed's lead vocal dominates, each vocalization of "walou" is done ensemble. This chorus vocalization is mimed in different shots by a diverse cross-section of neighborhood residents—a young child, a tea seller, a woman in *niqab*,⁵⁹ a group of young men playing soccer. Occasionally El Haqed's lines are multi-tracked, saturated with reverb, and placed in a surround-sound setting, mimicking the audio effect of playing children sampled in the video's introduction. In short, both the song structure and its layering and placement of voices resist any post/colonial politics of social engineering: there is no overarching social order, only people's voices.

In addition to this aural resistance to an engineered social order, the accompanying visuals and the rhetorical force of the repeated "walou" also oppose the politics of colonial display. As Zeynep Celik has argued, visual conquest of private urban spaces was an important underlying aspect of French conquest of Algeria and North Africa more generally.⁶⁰ The camera movement during the introduction of "Walou" rehearses this optical power play, not only entering the narrow alley of the *medina* but quite viscerally entering the personal space of the three men as well. At the same time, their insistence that "There's nothing here" (*ma kayn walou*) resists the type of visual engagement that seeks mastery through entry into private spaces. Occasionally, El Haqed's lyrics similarly challenge the commodification of urban space. "What is this tourism?" (*ee da al-sahafa*) he asks at one point (1:27). "No culture, no arts!" he raps later (2:04). The video's narrative puts an exclamation on this statement once the song is finished, showing one of the three men

from the introduction leaning out of a window, taking the last gulp from a bottle of liquor and then waving the camera off one last time. He shouts a number of phrases at the viewer, including "*dakhl souq raseq*," a colloquialism which translates literally as "go to the market of your head" but means, in essence, "mind your own business." Then one more time: "*Ma kayn walou!*"

The sounds and sights of urban life brought forth by El Haqed differ not just from Chawki's video but from those of other rappers as well. While Muslim puts the violence of *Ihouma* on display for the pedagogical purposes of making neighborhood residents aware of their social ills, El-Haqed not only resists the surveillance implicit in Chawki's "Tsunami" but also implicitly questions Dumou3 L7ouma's pedagogies. The "neighborhood" has no lessons to teach because there is "nothing" there. The word "Walou" is thus utilized in multiple ways, as a commentary on the impoverishment of those living in Casablanca's peripheries and as a critique of the colonial and postcolonial power structures that seek control through audio-visual capture. The politics of this relationship are borne out sonically as well. In Muslim's video, the audible soundscape of the recorded track—incessant, foreboding—and the barking dog signal danger, while the sounds of sirens and weeping are left "silent," evoked in the listener's imagination through visual cues. This suggests a certain connection between such indexical constructions of urban sound and the pedagogical labor they perform: the "heard" sounds of danger press the listener into action, to "open his ears" to the "unheard" sounds of the neighborhood's tears. El Haqed and his peers have no purpose and no agency, they are not "going" anywhere—as symbolized by the rapper pretending to drive a stalled jeep. All they have are the sounds of children, of roosters, of motorbikes, sounds that simply exist as the pure keynotes of everyday life. Situated within the larger context of El Haqed's political critique, "Walou" seems to interpellate state authorities and other elites who must open *their* ears to the everyday soundscapes experienced by Morocco's poor—and perhaps to address such ills *without* seeking cultural appropriation.

Music video for El Haqed's 'Walou'

Compared to Don Bigg's video, moreover, "Walou" offers such subtle critiques in part through a more nuanced construction of urban-rural relations. By showing the poverty of rural life, exemplified in the mother's death during childbirth, Bigg may on the one hand be attempting to create a shared sense of suffering between rural and urban underclasses, perhaps even to recuperate the latter through a "return" to their rural origins. Yet by locating cultural authenticity in the countryside, the "T-JR" video nonetheless reinforces the depravity of urban life: Bigg and his son must literally leave the city to reconnect with their cultural roots. This narrative, though not as overtly "touristic" as Chawki's video, nonetheless reconstitutes an "extractive" relationship between an exclusively upper-class urbanite population and the countryside. Even in the world constructed by the "T-JR" video, the suffering of the rural poor is not alleviated by the intervention of Bigg and his son. Moreover, it perpetuates the classist bias of Schafer's own critique, presenting a "return" to the "hi-fi" soundscape of the countryside as a possible "escape" from urban alienation. Either way, Don Bigg and his son—or their onscreen versions—are the exclusive beneficiaries. In short, Muslim and Bigg present different pedagogies of urban life to different classes: the middle- and lower-classes who are made responsible for their own moral (and economic) uplift; and elites who are offered the "escape" of the countryside's "hi-fi" soundscape.

In contrast to Muslim and Don Bigg, as well as to El Haqed's more overtly "political" tracks like "Dogs of the State" and "No More Silence," "Walou," finally, performs a more subtle political move of elevating urban soundworlds *without* the added baggage of moralizing rhetoric. The song and the video do this in part by incorporating peri-urban residents into

the visual performance of the video with very little curation or visual narrative to speak of. When the actual “voices” of neighborhood residents are incorporated into the mix, it is primarily through acts of refusal, that there is “nothing” for the visitor to see. Beyond this basic quotidian sensibility, however, I also want to suggest that the video’s politics are enacted through its evasion of the kind of indexical audio-visual constructions that “Dmou3 L7awma” and “T-JR” rely on. Audio-visual parallels are largely *mimetic* rather than indexical, with various urban residents mouthing El Haqed’s many interjections of “Walou.” In this way El Haqed allows the urban collective to “speak” through a pairing of his voice with the many, rather than teaching the audience the responsibility of “hearing” the *houma*—and thus rendering it subject to moral uplift—through their own aural imagination. El Haqed suggests that listeners should “open their ears” to such soundworlds as they are, rather than as they *could be* for the exclusive purposes of their rehabilitation, “festivalization,” or other forms fit for neoliberal consumption.

Conclusion: Hip-Hop, Listening, and Decoloniality

In this paper, I have examined a small sample of Moroccan hip-hop videos as a way of opening up new theoretical opportunities for understanding not just how sound and vision work in tandem within the genre, but also how that “audio-visual contract” may undergird particular political or ethical projects. I have argued that although lyrical and musical content remain salient, the videos themselves work through a distinctive form of audiovisual *synesthesia* to help construct a sensory experience of urban (and rural) space for the listener and viewer. In making this argument, I have tried to remain cognizant of the limitations of such an analysis, which I hope other scholars will take as provocation for future work. Though this analysis has focused on select videos where lyrical content and sensory constructions of urban space are more or less ideologically aligned, other scholarship might hone in on examples where the two elements sit in tension. Additionally, since most of these videos seem to employ the senses *pedagogically*, that is, to train the viewer-listener to attend to urban space as a way of seeking particular moral and political ends, connecting such pedagogies to other ethnographic cases could be generative.

Nonetheless, I would reiterate that there are crucial differences between the videos of Muslim and Bigg on the one hand and El Haqed on the other, differences which demonstrate the importance of such audiovisual synesthesia for particular political orientations. Though unfolding in contrasting spaces of *houma* and the countryside, Muslim and Bigg’s videos both build crucial elements of their respective soundscapes through *indexical* connections: we hear particular keynotes *because they show us how*, through visual or lyrical reference to “inaudible” elements they would nonetheless like us to “hear.” By working through what Connor glosses as our tendency to listen indexically, to in

a sense “hear” what is not actually “there,” sonically, those videos not only teach us *how* to listen, but also imply that such listening will help serve certain political ends. In fact, I would contend that the “T-JR” narrative of urban uplift through rural, cultural “extraction” raises questions about what sorts of political ends Muslim’s injunction to hear the (inaudible) tears of the neighborhood is really for. Will hearing the *houma* benefit urban populations themselves? Or will it simply transform urban spaces into sites amenable to touristic consumption?

Keeping all of this in mind, the political implications of El Haqed’s “Walou” go far beyond simply giving “voice” to the economically marginalized through the lived richness of its “everyday” soundtrack. In fact, other examples like Soultana’s “Woman’s Voice” or Bigg’s “16/05” perform that task quite eloquently as well. Rather, El Haqed’s “Walou” video, in its subtle framing of such a soundscape as containing “nothing” of import for cultural commodification, also refuses the (post)colonial impulse that would subsume such sound-worlds under contrasting neoliberal or “resistant” ideologies. As such, “Walou” challenges both Moroccan authoritarianism and a neoliberal politics of recognition. In doing so it further challenges scholarly approaches that would romanticize hip-hop’s mythologization as a genre of “resistance,” particularly after its admittedly important resonance during the 2011 uprisings. In drawing us into Casablanca’s peri-urban sound-world yet constantly challenging our tendency to hear indexically, to “sound out” what may not actually be “there,” El Haqed may be challenging scholars to resist *our own* desire to hear *only* hip-hop’s resonances as a tool of “resistance,” and to take in a broader array of its meanings and sonic resonance, in urban lifeworlds and beyond.

Notes

1. *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5: Marx and Engels: 1845-1847* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 42–43. ↩
2. David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). ↩
3. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5. ↩
4. Friedrich Kittler, “The City Is a Medium,” trans. Matthew Griffin, *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996): 717–30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1996.0051/> < <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1996.0051/> > . ↩
5. Rowland Atkinson, “Ecology of Sound: The Sonic Order of Urban Space,” *Urban Studies* 44, no. 10 (September 2007): 1905–1917, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980701471901> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980701471901> > . ↩
6. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977). ↩
7. David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, “Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 329–345, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-022510-132230> < <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-022510-132230> > . ↩

8. Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011). ↵
9. Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Justin A. Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013). ↵
10. I adopt the MENA/SWANA label from the contributors to *Lateral's* "Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the Middle East and North Africa/Southwest Asia and North Africa," as a way of "decenter{ing} the Americas and Europe as the cartographic center of the planet" while still recognizing that MENA remains much more recognizable as a geographic toponym. See Rayya El Zein, "Introduction: Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the Middle East and North Africa/Southwest Asia and North Africa," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2021): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.11> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.11> > . ↵
11. David A. McDonald, "New Directions and New Modalities: Palestinian Hip-Hop in Israel," and "'Carrying Words Like Weapons': DAM Brings Hip-Hop to the West Bank," in *My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 231–281. ↵
12. Michael P. Jeffries, "Hip-Hop Urbanism Old and New," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (March 2014): 706–715, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12106> < <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12106> > . ↵
13. Georgina Born, ed., *Music, Sound, and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). ↵
14. Michael Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press 1994; republished 2019), 68. ↵
15. Steve Connor, "Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing," in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (New York: Berg, 2004), 206. ↵
16. Georgina Born, introduction to *Music, Sound, and Space*, 21. ↵
17. George Revill, "Vocalic Space," in *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn Between Disciplines*, ed. Marijn Nieuwenhuis and David Crouch (Lenham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 43–62. ↵
18. Edmund Burke, III. *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014). ↵
19. Alessandra Ciucci, *The Voice of the Rural: Music, Poetry, and Masculinity among Migrant Moroccan Men in Umbria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 22. ↵
20. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat: Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). ↵
21. For more on Hassan II's reign, including the student protests and "Years of Lead" (mentioned below), see Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially 162–86. ↵
22. Aomar Boum, "Youth, Political Activism and the Festivalization of Hip-Hop Music in Morocco," in *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Society under Mohammed VI*, ed. Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine (New York: Routledge, 2012), 165–66. ↵
23. John Schaefer, "Protest Song Morocaine," *Middle East Report* 263 (Summer 2012): 26–32, <https://merip.org/2012/05/protest-song-marocaine/>. ↵
24. Julia-Clancy-Smith. *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an age of migration, c. 1800–1900*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). ↵
25. Abu-Lughod, *Urban Apartheid*, 169. ↵
26. Boum, "Festivalization of Hip-Hop," 163. ↵

27. Tony Langlois, "Outside-In: Music, New Media and Tradition in North Africa," in *The Mediterranean in Music: Critical Perspectives, Common Concerns, Cultural Differences*, ed. David Cooper and Kevin Dawe (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 97–114. ↵
28. Quoted in Boum, "Festivalization of Hip-Hop," 163. ↵
29. Kendra Salois, "Make Some Noise, Drari: Embodied Listening and Counterpublic Formations in Moroccan Hip Hop," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 1017–1048, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2014.0054> < <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2014.0054>> . ↵
30. Salois, "Make Some Noise, Drari," 1031. ↵
31. Salois, "Make Some Noise, Drari," 1031. ↵
32. Margo De Haas, "Soultana Raps for Change in Morocco," YouTube video, December 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTjM8wQ64nM> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTjM8wQ64nM>> . ↵
33. See Boum, "Festivalization of Hip-Hop"; and Taieb Belghazi, "Festivalization of Urban Space in Morocco," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 97–107. ↵
34. Belghazi, "Festivalization of Urban Space," 106. ↵
35. Koenraad Bogaert, *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). ↵
36. Brian Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 990. ↵
37. Kendra Salois, "Jihad Against Jihad Against Jihad," *The New Inquiry*, October 17, 2012, <https://thenewinquiry.com/jihad-against-jihad-against-jihad> < <https://thenewinquiry.com/jihad-against-jihad-against-jihad>> . ↵
38. Catherine Appert, *In Hip-Hop Time: Music, Memory, and Social Change in Urban Senegal* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). ↵
39. When referring to titles of Arabic songs, I maintain their transliteration of certain Arabic characters using numerals, such as a 3 for the "ayn," 7 for the hard "ha," and, in the Moroccan dialect, 9 for the "qaf." ↵
40. Muslim, "Dmou3 L7awma (Clip Officiel)," directed by Mehdi El Hachimi, YouTube video, posted January 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14DFUnHqdAw>. ↵
41. Translations of lyrics are my own, unless otherwise cited. ↵
42. The appearance of the video for "Tsunami" in the list of suggestions on the right-hand side of the YouTube page for "Dmou3 L7ouma" suggests not only that viewers *could* watch the two alongside each other, but also that many of the same users *do* watch both videos. ↵
43. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 93. ↵
44. Revill, "Vocalic Space," 53. See especially Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). ↵
45. Revill, "Vocalic Space," 53. ↵
46. Schafer, *Soundscape*, 58–60. ↵
47. Connor, "Edison's Teeth," 153. ↵
48. Connor, "Edison's Teeth," 154–55. ↵
49. "Morocco: Rapper Muslim Delivers 'Message' to Youth," *All Africa*, July 14, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201407151084.html> < <http://allafrica.com/stories/201407151084.html>> . Since first access and transcription on May 3, 2016, the link has become subscription only. ↵

50. Salois, "Make Some Noise Drari." ↩
51. Rayya El Zein, "From 'Hip-Hop Revolutionaries' to 'Terrorist-Thugs': 'Blackwashing' between the Arab Spring and the War on Terror," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 1 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.3> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.3>> . ↩
52. Appert, *In Hip-Hop Time*. ↩
53. Salois, "Jihad Against Jihad Against Jihad." ↩
54. Don Bigg, "Mabghitch," directed by Khalid Douache, YouTube video, posted June 29, 2011, <https://youtu.be/D3GMgKehhk0>. ↩
55. Don Bigg, "Don Bigg – TJR feat. Ahmed Soultan (Official Audio)," directed by Sebastien Rossi, YouTube video, posted February 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww8YnecpzE4> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww8YnecpzE4>> . ↩
56. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. ↩
57. For English-language reporting on El Haqed during this time, see Torie Rose DeGhett, "Morocco's Hip-Hop Revolutionary," *The Guardian*, Tuesday, April 17, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/17/el-haqed-morocco-hip-hop-revolutionary> < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/17/el-haqed-morocco-hip-hop-revolutionary>> . For an interview with the rapper following his release after his third arrest, see Samia Errazzouki, "Rap as Activism in Morocco: A STATUS/ Conversation between Mouad Belghouate (El-Haqed) and Samia Errazzouki," *Jadaliyya*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31691>. ↩
58. Mouad Belghoute. "L7a9ed – Walou (Clip Officiel) 2014," YouTube video, posted March 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT4yOKnT52I>. ↩
59. A style of women's veiling that leaves only a slit exposed for the eyes. ↩
60. Zeynep Celik, "A Lingering Obsession: The Houses of Algiers in French Colonial Discourse," in *The Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the City Through Text and Image*, ed. Celik, Julia Clancy-Smith, and Frances Tarpak (Los Angeles: Getty, 2009), 134–160. ↩
-

Author Information



Ian VanderMeulen

Ian VanderMeulen is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Kalamazoo College and a research scholar interested in sound, media, Islam, and the politics of performance in the MENA/SWANA region. He holds a PhD in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from New York University, MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the City University of New York, and degrees in music and religion from Oberlin College. His research has been supported by NYU and the American Institute of Maghrib Studies and appears in *American Ethnologist* as well as the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. In Fall 2023, Ian begins a Junior Research Fellowship at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University.

[View all of Ian VanderMeulen's articles.](#)

Article details

Ian VanderMeulen, "Hearing the *Houma*: Sound, Vision, and Urban Space in Moroccan Hip-Hop Videos," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.4>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

The Black Shoals Dossier

by Tiffany Lethabo King, Stephanie Latty, Stephanie Lumsden, Karyn Recollet and Megan Scribe and edited by Beenash Jafri

| Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023)

ABSTRACT This dossier collects four reflections on *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019) with responses by its author Tiffany Lethabo King. This dossier is based on an American Studies Association 2021 roundtable organized by Beenash Jafri.

KEYWORDS Black studies, diaspora, collaboration, Native studies, decolonial, Octavia Butler, erotics, Indigenous studies, freedom

Editor's Note

by Beenash Jafri

Tiffany Lethabo King's field-changing 2019 monograph, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, made its mark long before it hit the bookshelves. For several years prior to the book's publication, King's work had already generated field-changing conversations across not only Black and Native studies, but in adjacent interdisciplines across ethnic, gender, American and cultural studies; to give but one example, her 2013 dissertation has been cited over 100 times. Unhinging the epistemological and ontological presumptions of settler colonial studies, *The Black Shoals* unapologetically refuses dominant registers of academic knowledge production and maps alternate Black and Native feminist cartographies of being, living, and belonging.

In this dossier, Karyn Recollet < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier#recollet> >, Stephanie Lumsden < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier#lumsden> >, < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier#recollet> > Stephanie Latty < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier#latty> >, and Megan Scribe < <https://csalateral.org/issue/12-1/black-shoals-dossier#scribe> > reflect on the significance of *The Black Shoals* for their own work. The breadth and depth of each essay speaks not only to the generative force that King's book has inspired, but that King herself inspires for so many of us as a scholar doing transformative work under the

pressures of the neoliberal academy's violence. On a personal note: thank you, Tiffany, for your brilliance, care, and generosity across many years. I am continually learning from the poethics you model.¹

This dossier inaugurates a new occasional series connected to *Lateral's* book reviews that provides a space for in-depth engagement with new books in cultural studies. *The Black Shoals* was reviewed by Laura Goldblatt < <https://csalateral.org/reviews/black-shoals-offshore-formations-black-native-studies-king-goldblatt/>> in *Lateral* 9.2 (2020).

Where We Intend to Meet after the “Turn”

by Tiffany Lethabo King

When I think about the force of land, land as a form of relation, and relations between Indigenous feminisms and Black feminisms, I think about my hike in 2014 through the Rio Preto's dry riverbed in the ancestral homelands of the Puri (State of Bahia, Brazil). This hike across the seasonally dry riverbeds of Rio Preto is a story that I tell over and over again. It is just one of my land—or thinking with Karyn Recollet—landing stories.

During the river's dry season, visitors to the Vale do Capao often head to the river to hike across its rocky terrain and bathe in some of the pools of rain that make for good swimming holes. The day that I went for a hike with friends, I struggled. I was fatigued through most of the hike and feared that my unsteady steps would cause me to slip and fall on the wet rocks. I feared for my safety.

However, my fear did not overtake me. Another feeling prevailed. A new kind of calibration and attunement emerged and made itself available to me. To make it through the hike safely, I had to switch my attention from matching the steps of my friends and guides and feel the flow and footing that the rocks provided for me. As I trusted and flowed, I noticed that there was always a rock, an edge of a rock, a small sandy spot or a groove that welcomed each foot. Other possibilities, peculiar and unexpected angles, new grooves, and continual openings were the current and language of relation on the riverbed.

Dry riverbeds often have a subterranean current flowing beneath them. A pulse and energy are present and can be felt even if you cannot always see water. Feeling and thinking with the words of Stephanie Lumsden (Hupa), Karyn Recollet (diasporic Cree), Stephanie Latty (Black), and Megan Scribe (Ininiw iskwew/Norway House Cree Nation), allows me to experience the force of what I think of (and know) as the subterranean rivers of Indigenous and Black feminist relations. It is a visible and invisible relational space that is old as African and Indigenous encounters in the Americas (including Black Indigeneity). In fact, our

meeting spaces and solidarity work often meet up at riverbanks, as have the Sacred Waters Pilgrimage that started after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The Sacred Waters Pilgrimage is a mobile Black, Native, Two-Spirit and femme people space of meeting, praying, and healing that moves up and down the banks of the Mississippi River from Minneapolis to New Orleans.

My own engagements with Karyn, Stephanie, Stephanie, and Megan can be described as returns to some familiar spots on shared riverbeds that we made out of stolen moments at academic conferences and meetings. While our formal gathering that marks the occasion of this special dossier took place in 2021 during a virtual panel of the American Studies Association conference, I have met, talked with, and been lovingly pushed and pulled by each of them into a form of generative relation across several spaces and geographies on Turtle Island. I am grateful for their desire to be in relationship with me again. For my entire academic career, I have longed to be in relationship with Indigenous feminist scholars. I think there is something particular and peculiar about the kind of company that we keep with each other as folks marked as domestic enemies by the U.S. and Canadian nation-states. And perhaps specifically because of the ways that our meetings kindle undesirable political possibilities, it is hard to find safe gathering spaces. Over the years, I have struggled to find academic spaces free of interlopers, saboteurs, and institutional blockades.

Even when the academy finds it convenient to engage the “Black and Indigenous Studies turn,” it is done with violence. So often the curatorial practices of non-Black and non-Indigenous scholars that attempt to stage a meeting between Black and Indigenous peoples (and the fields) are structured by an impulse to discipline, block, capture, and contain what is possible and potentially transformative (unsettling) about Black and Indigenous relation. Over the years, I have witnessed non-Black and non-Indigenous scholars demand that a Black and Indigenous gathering and or agenda give an account of non Black and non Indigenous positionality or use a language that speaks to their role in the relationship. While the language(s) of Black and Indigenous relations are not exclusive, the relation and it’s grammars, idioms, and syntax are particular. So much of what the five of us (Latty, Lumsden, Recollet, Scribe, and King) are deeply meditating on in this space are the kinds of language, kinetics/falling, dreaming, erotic risk-taking and postures of feminist and queer care that we might craft with and for each other. Drawing inspiration from the recent expressions of queer feminist Black and Indigenous care demonstrated by Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *Rehearsals for Living*,² I write directly to Karyn Recollet, Stephanie Lumsden, Stephanie Latty, and Megan Scribe.

Finally, Dear Beenash, thank you for organizing the American Studies Association roundtable on *The Black Shoals* and facilitating a continuation of the discussion here in

Lateral. You have moved with a deep ethics of care that has flowed with our river.

A Tesseract as a Processual Space of Becomingness

by Karyn Recollet

Dear reader, in the following words I think alongside King's beautiful, generous and capacious writing in relation with Charmaine Lurch and in doing so, I witness and build upon a series of ethical and relational landing practices that gather us into relation. I appreciate the intimacy, and gentle ways of thinking, and creating with each other as we shape liberatory atmospherics through the co-constitution of future re-worlding.

In chapter five of *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King walks us through conversations with artist Charmaine Lurch's *Revisiting Sycorax*³ to describe the ways that Lurch sculpts towards the space of Katherine McKittrick's thinking with Sylvia Wynters' concept of the demonic, as a non-deterministic model to make possible a different kind of unfolding, re-presenting the grounds as the absented presence of Black womanhood from which we can imagine the world and more humanly workable geographies.⁴ Lurch's tesseract sculpts the demonic through manipulating lines into the space of a new dimension. Lurch contemplates the fourth-dimensional new image of the Black subject as human and visible through different dimensions. Lurch created a tesseract through depicting a four dimensional hy cube that is never entirely visible wherein, "the tesseract acts as analogy for the black condition in its capacity to be every changing and ultimately unknowable"⁵ King offers that Lurch takes up the tesseract in order to figure ideas and forms in ways that words cannot replicate—thus we see the representation of an absented presence that McKittrick speaks of in the demonic through Lurch's material rendering of lines as portals as possibilities for alternative ways of being in relation with space. The form of *Revisiting Sycorax* is porous, holey, and in constant renegotiation with itself. King describes Lurch's practice in which they mold their own "version, or ensemble, of questions about the 'whereabouts' of Sycorax by interlacing air and wire in ways that perforate and displace the air to rearrange the space around and within it."⁶

Within my own meditations on star glyphing and relations between rock, fire, water, and air, the space of the tesseract activates these flows through, between, underneath, and above matter through languages of seepage, liquidity, falling—embodying the movements of landing into, towards, and falling into relation. *Revisiting Sycorax* is articulated as a gathering or meetings space of "spiderwebbed and netlike masses of strings of black and copper wire,"⁷ which, when I position my own ruminations of landing into relation with

Revisiting Sycorax, Lurch's brilliance offers multiple dimensionalities as form of thinking through landing. Atmospheric of molten lava, fire, and copper liquidity remind me of the expansivity of landing grammars, as in the shoal, as calling for more subaqueous, subterranean, celestial modes of relationality.

If we were to be in conversation with these more-than- / other-than-human gatherings of matter, what would they tell us about their errant, exilic movement patterns and what they experience with other forms of matter? What can they teach us about how we can gather in generative, desirous forms and shapes? Perhaps that if we were to become riparian zones we could fall into each other as an intowardness, holding each other's tensions and creating spaces for release—as edgeless forms of matter. *Revisiting Sycorax* can be viewed as holding space for multiple choreographies of suture, bringing light to a landing processual practice that leaves as imprint an otherwise map into the kinds of futures we yearn for. The sonic spaces between the layers and folds of wire creates the spaces for the forms of resurgent and decolonial listening⁸ inherent in the spaces of relational ethics where listening is potentiated as a relational action occurring not merely between listener and listened to, but between the layers of more than / other than human kinships such as rock, matter, and their designs—traces and folds as strata to help us to imagine alternative forms of gathering, or visiting.

Thus, the tesseract presents possibilities towards a form of kin listening in between rock matter. As a diasporic shapeshifting kin, I witness as rocks inspire to be comfortable in a space of unknowing, to be comfortable with matter as a way of being perceptive and open to unexpected/ wondrous forms and shapes that do not fit within predetermined spaces. Rather, like shoaling, we become the granules that gather us, shaping us into new and unpredictable rogue formations, thus facilitating a space wherein ongoing emergence of new imaginaries are possible.

The tesseract, and the middle spaces that it affords, become cavernous becomings—a falling into an elsewhere where expressions of falling or landing are possible through a language of leaning intowards without claiming. Witnessing the shoals in relationship with *Revisiting Sycorax*—aesthetics of Black geographical expression through the conversation between material formations and movements—has helped me conceptually orient towards Indigenous diasporic landing in more capacious ways—as an ethic, practice, and motivation for my work which includes making star quilts. As when I think with Dylan Robinson's ethics of relational and decolonial listening, alongside the tesseract as a shape or form to think with, I appreciate these forms which allow for us to "sess"⁹ In the novel, sessing is an orogene practice of wayfinding through an organ called Sessapinae used to explore the underneath. It is a way to feel one's way through rock strata to quell the shakes of earth's movements through the sessing markers underground, which are described thus: "small

blocks of marble with words etched into one surface. It takes a very fine degree of control to not only find the blocks but determine the words; it's like tasting a page of book."¹⁰ as generative modes of listening, sensing (spiralling, shifting, leaning) to visit from a diasporic positioning that acknowledges edges, and edgelessness, thereby shaping alternative movements through sensing space/place and landing intentionally.

Revisiting Sycorax asks us to consider the possibility that maybe our falling into place is messy, indeterminant and unpredictable. This work speaks deeply to me as an Indigenous person who has landed into place as a result of the Children's Aid Society's removal of Indigenous bodies from their home territories. Rock helps me to think about my own landings into space in a way I can live with—so that I can move alongside, while still madly critiquing forms of Indigenous removal and dispossession.

Dylan Robinson's provocations in *Hungry Listening* help me to situate landing as a process that contains purposeful agility/articulation of intention, through Indigenous mobility and proprioception as stimuli that are produced and perceived within a so-constitutive kinship resonate theory. If I were a gathering of matter/materiality, I would follow that slip, that wire, willfully and intentionally. I would visit along the way—other gatherings of matter as knots, shoals, ridges, edges. I also think about the dedication praxis, the ethical citational praxis of considering landing as a movement, as gesturing, sonic atmospherics of meteoric falls, landings within an atmospheric of wind, pressure, tension, and a release: an abandon (as in leaning into a slip).

King points out how Lurch's sculpture *Revisiting Sycorax* creates and crosses Black geographies, mimicking the unusual terrains of Black exilic thought and aesthetics. I am moved to think about this in relation to sounding practices as unusual sonic terrains. How might *Revisiting Sycorax* come into conversation with Caroline Monnet's *The Flow Between Hard Places*, a vertical concrete sculpture embodying the soundwave of the word *pasapkedjinawong* ("the river that passes between the rocks") in Anishinaabemowin, as shared by Elder Rose Wawatie-Beaudin.¹¹ This sculpture proposes another anti-monument whereby the undulating waves of the sculpture evoke water constantly in motion, time, and the transference of knowledges. This work engages dimensionality through the sonic assemblage of three. I appreciate Monnet's contributions to the discourse around monuments in relationship with King's. As Monnet suggests, "It's important for people to have different types of monuments In this case, the idea of using sound and materializing it into sculpture that can become a monument is interesting, as is representing water as a monument."¹²



Figure 1. "Star Blanket" (2022) by Karyn Recollet.

As material forms, star blankets (see Figure 1) center collage as a way of inciting a gathering, layering ideas, and creating new forms—multiverses—and a way of being and curating the worlds differently. King's writing attends to the complexities and ruptures that we need to activate as reparative gestures (or what Tanya Lukin Linklater calls recuperative gestures).¹³ King offers the space of the shoal as "simultaneously land and sea to fracture this notion that black diaspora studies is over determined by rootlessness, only metaphorized by water, and to disrupt the idea that Indigenous studies is solely rooted and fixed in imaginaries of land as territory."¹⁴ In other words, she critiques the overdetermination of Black = water, and Indigenous = land as the only possible relations. The shoal in King's work "creates a rupture and at the same time opens up analytical possibilities for thinking of Indigeneity as exceeding the symbol and analytic of land."¹⁵ Rather than perpetuating location as the only possible technology for Indigenous relations with lands, motion inspired land-based work infuses understandings of place with a future-oriented possibility. This opening, these middle spaces of possibility, require us to see, witness, and listen collage-like; to be open to multiversal layerings; to reanimate cyphers and circuitous motions as practices of space making.

As a multidimensional glyph, the star blanket functions in a similar way to the shoal as a landing device. Like the star blanket, as a technology of landing, the shoal produces an architectural terrain where the imprinting of the landing itself, much like the center point of

a star, illuminates an imprint of a falling, a gathering of granulations, articulations of fine falling into relation, and it is from here that we can begin the process of theorizing landing practices through tesseract-like gatherings of multitudinous realms, shaped by portals, between spaces, as sites of capacious landing, where song, glyph activates buildings, trees, and other forms of diasporic architectures. The kin choreosonics of suturing offers a landing practice of diaspora—part of landing processual practice of repair—such that is mirrored in Monnet's and in Lurch's stunning works that imprint processions of care. In each case, we are listening to the fall, the landing as a slowed down practice of encountering atmospherics as thoughts, concepts that shape and gather into formation something that is surprising, illuminative, secret. Like a spider being you are suturing in the landing. These tactile articulations of the fall are slow—producing transmissions perhaps, movement-based sonic attunements which gather us in particular ways.

As I enter into the atmospherics of Lurch's work, I think about the many ways in which *Revisiting Sycorax* might be envisioned as a speculative cartography mapping sound territory, through thinking about the spiral as a landing technology to unbind static boundaries of settlement.¹⁶ Languages and concepts activate a wrapping around, an orbiting land in a spiral. The spiral, the intertwining of copper wire, becomes a way of gathering tension, a weaving form of offering invitations into conversation through the very act of landing into relation. The shoal offers a space of departure for the kinds of visioning that we have to articulate through movements, sonics, choreographies that begin at the knotted point—that began with the relation as a point of departure and a way into deeper relation through realizing that our bodies are the gravitational pulling force forming an atmospheric of care. Our articulations within and sourced from a point of friction remind me of the ways that rock's porosity is a space-making project of re-memory, an archive of livingness that activates something. The shoal incites me to think about the livingness of memory in rock, the possibilities of indeterminant glitches within the porosity—the vesicles, as Joseph Pierce reminds me to think about. This indeterminant falling space—where we fall into relation as spirals come to land in their fissures—include a creative potentiality for different forms of livingness to thrive. The spiral, as a formation of landing shaped by the air, creates the breath in bubbles that then gets solidified into form, becoming shoals—an interiority, a secret, a space to hide precious things.

Moving/Wiggling a Line

Lurch's ritual of twisting and wiggling points, lines, and planes in a way moves close to Wynter's conception of the demonic and its unpredictability and openness. Lurch scrunches, stretches, and disfigures normative notions of time, dimensionality, and space.

—Tiffany Lethabo King¹⁷

In describing a conversation with the material forms brought together in his sculptural piece *Édifice*,¹⁸ Michael Belmore offers that the ways that rocks experience time and space are quite different than ours.”¹⁹ Further,

These collections of stones have moved and settled on the land paralleling histories of migration, displacement, erasure, and the resilient ties of communities that connect across space. Carved and lined with copper, they seemingly radiate heat—as the years pass, the glow of the copper fades and turns green, the stones settle and take their place amongst those who have travelled before them.²⁰

Likewise, engaging the materiality of the granular sediments that shape them, shoals embody and become space is of malleability, edges, and edgelessness. To render impossible the very thinking behind the imposition of boundaries as legitimizers of control and violence, Lurch’s careful, intentional praxis of *moving a line* touches and communes with *Édifice*’s edginess that spills over into copper that then seeps into rock. These are reminders of the falling into of errant geographies whose spillage refuses nation-state conquest. The star blanket came about through the delicate practice of moving a line, and holding tensions of the lines themselves, more akin to the malleability and the struggle to line things up, reflecting the impossible task of navigating conquest terrains.

In my own making practice, the delicate patterning of the star quilt as a way of landing refused this perfect, linear, and one-dimensional landedness as we are encouraged to perform. In fact, what I learned from star quilting as a practice is that moving a line (lining up) requires us to pay attention instead to the layers of strata above, below, tentacularly—in an ongoing commitment towards centering alignments, fabric chasing fabric, covering up frayed edges, and suturing the tesseract. In this way the forms of the shapes of the gatherings that we perform/ activate, and invite others into, are more about the doing of the falling into—a collaborative movement practice that is reflected in Charmaine Lurch’s wire meeting wire, intertwining, fusing to create fulcrums. Landing becomes a purposeful agility, the articulation of attention as a sensing of the body during a fall; a holding of tension and release (inspired by Ashon Crawley’s “Otherwise Movements”).²¹ A landing through star blanket technology, Belmore’s *Edifice*, and Lurch’s sculptural forms can make possible a refusal of the landedness of land / a reminder that our landing genealogies are (much like the atmospheric residue left in the wake of a meteorite, or noticeable genealogies of flight) deeply sutured, sedimented in our land relations. Landings are land relations, and landback is also an exploration of landings, of suture, and of repair of landings. We are being called into this indeterminate space of flux and change (as in the shoal) to explore our own edgelessness as a space of reparative gestures of leaning into one another.

Response from Tiffany Lethabo King

Dear Karyn,

Your story of falling and landing as a diasporic Cree woman made me return to Charmaine Lurch's extraordinary sculptural figure of Sycorax to consider her exilic dance once more. I had not imagined the possibility of falling or "choreographies of falling" when I first encountered her. The lines beneath Sycorax's feet produce a space in flux as well. It is hard to tell whether the lines render the space land, water, or both, but the space is surely alive under her feet. Karyn, your choreographies at the level of language that move not only back and forth between verb and gerund but between aesthetic practices (this time Lurch, Monnet, Belmore, and your own sky quilting) is what sets the "expansivity of landing grammar" in motion. In your lines that seek and find flight you write,

"The tesseract, and the middle spaces that it affords, become cavernous becomings—a falling into an elsewhere where expressions of fallings, or landing are possible through a language of leaning intowards without claiming. Witnessing the shoals in relationship with Revisiting Sycorax—aesthetics of Black geographical expression through the conversation between material formations and movements—has helped me conceptually orient towards Indigenous diasporic landing in more capacious ways—as an ethic, practice, and motivation for my work which includes making star quilts."

Above you write of our fallings and landings as a site of Indigenous and Black becoming. Falling, and "leaning intowards" one another without claims is another kind of relation.

As we consider that falling (and landing) are "messy, indeterminant and unpredictable" we also interrupt static relations to land. As you write sky quilt glyphs and sutures with Lurch, Monnet, and Belmore, you also enact an un-suturing or refusal of the "landedness of land." Your choreographies, suturing, and quilting, across aesthetic meditations on landing, take me back to the dry riverbed. The riverbed did not offer me a stable understanding of it as a predictable stratum from which I could stand adroit and dictate my own path. It was a space of possible fallings/fellings that required me to reorient my body-mind-land equilibrium. The body must both remember old choreographies and make new ones to sustain itself. The faller embraces a whole host of capacities, skills, grammars, and proprioception (against normative notions of ability) with a demanded urgency.

You write that, "Landings are land relations, and land back is also an exploration of landings, of suture, and of repair of landings. We are being called into this indeterminate space of flux and change (as in the shoal) to explore our own edgelessness as a space of reparative gestures of leaning into one another." Falling is a space of vulnerability that

requires a new relationship to land/ing. Landing is always a relation, and we must not forget who we became and with whom we became to survive the fall.

I long to see you (falling-landing) beyond zoom world, friend.

Na:te:dil We Are Going Home: A Meditation on Tiffany King's *The Black Shoals*

by Stephanie Lumsden

Reading *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* is like hearing the waves of the ocean, smelling its brine, and feeling the coarseness of the sand on the bottoms of my feet. It is a sensuous experience textured by Tiffany Lethabo King's unique ability to draw the reader into the world of poetics and possibilities that emerge from the Black shoals. Shoals, as King explains, are geological formations that form a barrier between the land and ocean creating a dynamic, unknowable, and life generating space.²² King invites us to blur the presumed boundaries between Black and Native studies (as well as experiences and people) and embrace each other. She encourages us to avoid the pitfalls of surrendering our visions of the future to white modes of thought that further entrench ongoing conquest and foreclose on what could and will be instead. Importantly, she reminds the reader that the projects of Black abolition and Native decolonization circumvent liberal humanism and offer alternative articulations of freedom.²³ If freedom is a place, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has famously said, then perhaps this is how we get there.²⁴

As a methodological practice and approach, the shoal functions as a process and space where boundaries and binaries constructed between sea and land, Black and Native, aesthetics and theory, and human and nonhuman are blurred.

—Tiffany Lethabo King²⁵

There are several key theoretical interventions in King's book but there are two in particular that I look forward to utilizing in my own writing. The first is her critique of white settler colonial studies. King argues that the discourse of settlers/settlement over-emphasizes the significance of white settler relationships to land and disavows the violence of ongoing genocide by turning away from the knowledge that "settlers also become conquistadors/(humans) through Native genocide and Black dehumanization."²⁶ White settler colonial studies is fundamentally limited by its impulse to rescue the white liberal human subject and therefore should not be the intellectual genealogy from which we most heavily draw. However, the analytical frame of conquest allows us to theorize conquistador humanism as a process by which white subjects *become* through Black and Indigenous

death.²⁷ Black vernaculars of conquest, King asserts, hold space for discussions of genocide and slavery without committing intellectual and erotic energies to recuperating the project of white liberal humanism.²⁸ Beyond being a more generative theoretical frame, conquest is a grammar that is capacious enough for Black and Indigenous healing, belonging, and world-making.

Home increasingly had to do with how those of us in the circle amid the rising smoke make peace with one another again and again.

—Tiffany Lethabo King²⁹

While guiding the reader through her engagement with artist Charmaine Lurch's sculpture "Revisiting Sycorax" in the *The Black Shoals*' last chapter, King offers a beautiful rumination on Black exile and the meaning of home. Reading it, I was transported through time and space from Toronto, to the Caribbean, and finally to my own homeland of Natinixw, the Hoopa Valley. Among Hupa people the valley is often referred to as "our home forever," and I admit I had taken that for granted until reading King's work. Home, she theorizes, is not a static confine, but a set of ethical relationships that are placemaking/homemaking.³⁰ So when we say "our home forever" perhaps we do not just mean that the land is ours (which is most certainly true), we may also mean that as long as there are human and nonhumans to make ethical relations with, we will have a home. Home is not a border, it's a call for more relatives.

In a recent essay, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that for Indigenous peoples, generative refusal is a rejection of the settler colonial state coupled with the (re)generation of new ways of building a livable life with each other.³¹ Importantly, she goes on to say that these alternative ways of building life are guided by an Indigenous ethic of care and responsibility that transcends the imposed imperial and colonial borders of the nation-state; these are the ethics of internationalism.³² For Simpson as with King, revolutionary movements such as the movement for Black lives are capacious enough for many iterations of liberation, contemporaneous sovereignties, and relations so long as they are based in an ethics of care and responsibility. Simpson articulates Indigenous epistemologies by invoking art, kinship, play, love, and political solidarity in a way that eschews a single vision of freedom and invites others to make a home alongside her on her ancestral homeland. I hear echoes of *The Black Shoals* in her piece.

The longing for home or an "elsewhere" that has animated the desire of so many Black diasporic subjects in exile who seek reprieve from white supremacist violence is perhaps answered by Simpson's invitation to make ethical relationships with one another and the land. Hers is an invitation to collectively participate in finding freedom, belonging, and home through relationships based on an ethic of reciprocity and care. By refusing to isolate Native political struggles for decolonization and liberation from the freedom struggles of

Black diasporic subjects and others, Simpson demonstrates how Indigenous and Black peoples can nourish each other's freedom dreams. I am bringing Simpson into my discussion of *The Black Shoals* because I want to highlight the ways that Native/Indigenous studies scholars and communities are poised to respond to the questions that King poses in her work. Too often, the political struggles and aspirations of Black and Native peoples are depicted as though they are at odds, as if there is not enough freedom for all of us. Simpson, with whom King is in discussion in her text, helps to widen the opening to the Black and Native futures created by *The Black Shoals*. This opening is generative for my thinking about the relationship between abolition and decolonization.

The Black Shoals offers an urgently needed intervention in the fields of Black and Native studies. Throughout the text, King reveals the violence of conquistador humanism, interrupts white settler colonial studies' presumed ownership of radical Black and Native futurities, and dissolves the imagined borders between the studies of slavery and genocide by deploying the theoretical framework of conquest. I am grateful to have this stunning work to return to as I think and feel my way through my own project about Black abolition and Native decolonization. *The Black Shoals* should be read as an invitation for Black and Native communities (scholarly and otherwise) to extend kinship to one another, to delight in the erotic and generative space of the Black shoals, and to dream dreams of what abolition and decolonization will be. Freedom is indeed a place, and we will get there by making a home with each other.

Response from Tiffany Lethabo King

Dear Stephanie,

I remember meeting you in 2018 at UCLA. We were a part of a working group on racial violence. I recall presenting a project on the violent processes of settler laborers that labored across Black and Indigenous femme bodies. Many of us were attending to gendered anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence in our work. Some of us mined the archives of historical violence that made Black and Indigenous people specimens, that justified holding our bones in museum basements, and that reduced us to mere matter. I specifically remember your caution to participants—myself, and another—about our use of the “S” and “N” words as we tried in earnest to hold each other's painful histories. I appreciate the intervention. Whom can hold and speak my terror and pain depends upon their relationship with me.

The language that we invent, craft, and use to recognize each other reflects the kinds of relationships we have with another. You write about about Leanne Betasomasake Simpson's desire for Indigenous and Black people to “nourish each other's freedom

dreams." I too often turn to Simpson to articulate this Black and Indigenous poetics of freedom. In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson expresses a deep "ethical obligation[s]" structured by her desire, and intention to shape radical resurgence in relationship to the Black Radical tradition.³³ Simpson is not only invested in revolutionary change, but she is specifically interested in and committed to moving toward that horizon in relationship with Black people. She states that within "Nishnaabewin, I have ethical obligations to the Black community."³⁴ Like, Simpson, I also believe that Black people and Indigenous people have and articulate through language (and extra-discursively) specific obligations to and dreams for one another.

In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson moved toward the shared language and enactments of flight and fugitivity. In *The Black Shoals*, I thought through conquest. As you aptly argue, I did intend to "interrupt[s] white settler colonial studies' presumed ownership of radical Black and Native futurities," and I wanted to "dissolve[s] the imagined borders between the studies of slavery and genocide by deploying the theoretical framework of conquest." Rather than dismiss "white settler colonial studies" as a discourse entirely, I chose the grammar of conquest to talk about a specific and shared history of surviving specific kinds of violent bloodletting that attempted to ungender, unmatter,³⁵ and annihilate Black and Indigenous people in the Americas. Surviving these particular kinds of violence produces distinct kinds of capacities, survival strategies, practices of joy, and of course, language(s). Not one language, but many. Again, I would not argue that the language is exclusive; it is just particular to the unique relationship and practice that is Black and Indigenous futurity. It is as specific as is the notion of home. You write that, "Among the Hupa people the valley is often referred to as "our home forever." You clarify and nuance this Hupa articulation of the valley as our home forever by offering that you "do not just mean that the land is ours (which is mostly true), we may also mean that as long as there are human and nonhumans to make ethical relations with, we will have a home. Home is not a border, it's a call for more relatives." Home means a very specific thing to the Hupa who are forever in a process of making more relatives. And often our Black and Indigenous relatives have precise names and special roles as kin.

Thank you for searching for language with me.

"There are New Suns": The Shoal as Abolitionist and Decolonial DreamSpace

by Stephanie Latty

As a space in and from which we may reach for one another in ways that are in alignment with our collective desires and longings for liberation, the shoal is a geography that moves us toward new ways of being in relation with one another. The shoal, as an analytic, offers us a chance to pause in a liminal space of possibility and to consider how we might ask a different set of questions and create a different set of stories about our social world. The shoal, neither land nor sea, shifts and morphs and changes, dreamlike—and as Tiffany Lethabo King has put it—evading capture.³⁶

Engaging with *The Black Shoals* has led me to linger on dreaming, liminality, potential, and possibility as a home for Black and Indigenous relational theorization and liberatory praxis. In her text, King opens not only theoretical terrain but also creates a place of livingness—by this I mean a place in which we may *live*—for those of us compelled to think through these relational possibilities.³⁷ The shoal is a geography of radical openness where Black and Indigenous people can imagine and cocreate futures unmoored from the binaries that tether us to liberal humanness.

Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that abolition is a place-making practice which “starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place.”³⁸ She goes on, “the undoing of bondage—abolition—is quite literally to change places” and to destroy geographies of carcerality.³⁹ Gilmore emphasizes that abolition is a practice of doing, building, and presencing that requires a disassembly of existing structures of domination and involves building the world anew. Gilmore’s assertions also emphasize the importance of place and land in our considerations of abolition. In conversation with Gilmore, Dylan Rodriguez writes that “abolition is a dream toward futurity vested in insurgent, counter-civilizational histories—genealogies of collective genius that perform liberation under conditions of duress.”⁴⁰ Taken together, an abolitionist vision means not only engaging in active refusal of the carceral, but of dreaming up and building the world(s) otherwise.

The shoal is a site through which we may begin or continue our abolitionist and decolonial dream practice. I am reminded here of a scene in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, which begins with an account of the recurring dream of Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of the story. In the dream, Olamina is levitating in a burning house. Before her, she sees a doorway that is emanating a cool glowing light. She floats her body towards it “as though to slide on the air drifting a few feet above the floor, caught between terror and joy.”⁴¹ She continues levitating but begins to drift away from the door and toward the fire, only partially in control of her movements. As the flames spread and grow around her, the dream shifts to a dreamscape in which Olamina is hanging up laundry to dry with her stepmother. Looking up at a starry sky streaked by the Milky Way, her stepmother reminisces about a time when the city lights blazed so brightly that they drowned out the stars. As Olamina gazes up into the night sky, identifying some constellations and imagining the names of

others, she comes to the conclusion that she would rather have the stars over the city lights. Over the years since I first read *Parable*, I have remembered this doorway in Olamina's recurring dream and imagined it as a kind of liminal dreamspace of open possibility—one that offers us the opportunity to divest from the capitalistic drive of urgency and productivity, and one that can allow us to slow. That is, after all, part of what a shoal does. It slows.

As we move through the story, the reader sees the way that Olamina imagines herself and her community in the future. She plans ahead and visions herself and those she cares surviving in a world that is unsurvivable, murderous, and unrelenting in its violence. Olamina has a condition called hyper-empathy syndrome, meaning she can feel the pain and pleasure of others as if it were her own. When they bleed, she bleeds. The future for Olamina seems grim in a bleak and pain-filled world. However, what is clear is that her liberation is bound to the liberation of others. As a liminal space between sea and land, the shoal as an analytic demands that we consider Black life and Indigenous life as distinct yet inseparable in a way that explodes Cartesian binaries. King asks readers to consider Black and Indigenous life in their co-constitutive complexity and simultaneity.

Robin Kelley writes "Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother's belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us."⁴² In *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina continues to plan for the future she sees coming. Along the way, Olamina creates a belief system called Earthseed and through her journal entries and the verses that she creates, writes herself into the future. She imagines Earthseed "taking root in the stars."⁴³ We might think of her Earthseed verses as a kind of shoal—a space to imagine, presence, and actively create a future together otherwise.

In our present moment of multiple and overlapping crises, it is more important than ever that Black and Indigenous scholars engage in ceremonies of dreaming up how we might create futures together that are vibrant with livingness. This is what *The Black Shoals* makes possible—new worlds, new relationalities, and new suns "forged off the shoreline in the space of the shoal."⁴⁴

Response from Tiffany Lethabo King

Dear Stephanie (Latty),

I am honored that you were inspired to think with Octavia Butler and Ruth Wilson Gilmore as you meditated on my book. I think about ends and beginnings of worlds when I think of Butler and Gilmore as thinkers and dreamers. The ways that their work describes and creates scenes of "freedom as a place," is palpable. It is why so many organizers, artists,

teachers, and way makers travel with Butler and Wilson's dreamscapes. I thought about the last time that I turned to Butler's *Parable of the Sower* for something. I am always returning to it as it has functioned as an actual guide for living in the twenty-first century.

When I returned to it again, it was the fall of 2020. I was teaching Black Feminist Thought during the first fall semester of the COVID-19 pandemic and after many of my students had just left Atlanta's burning streets following George Floyd's murder. So many of my students wanted—*needed*—to talk about violence. They had been talking about abolition for years, but wanted to get their heads (and hearts) around what role violence—and their use of it—played in an abolitionist horizon. I turned again to *Parable of the Sower* to open up a conversation with my students about Lauren Olamina's ethics of violence. Lauren made peace with and used violence strategically for the immediate survival of her community and the long-term vision of Earth Seed.

We talked about Lauren Olamina's relationship to violence. We also talked about her power and disability (hyper-empathy syndrome). However, this time we were able to talk about violence and disability together in the context of abolitionist and decolonial struggle. Lauren Olamina has a unique relationship to violence as a person with hyper-empathy who must at once deploy and temper violence to survive. I appreciate your articulation of her vulnerability as "she can feel the pain and pleasure of others as if it were her own. When they bleed, she bleeds." And more importantly, "that her liberation is bound to the liberation of others." Lauren Olamina's hyper empathy makes her a figure of immense capacity. Her capacity for care and potential to wield violence cannot be separated in the context in which she lives. As a Black femme traveler through the end of one world and the beginning of another, destruction and creation are tethered. The capacity to wield violence (force for some) is a very difficult topic to broach in the academic abolitionist and decolonial classroom.

Lauren Olamina became an apt model for students whose attentions turned toward Minneapolis (a city much like Toronto), where Black abolitionist and Indigenous decolonial imaginaries were shaping discussions about revolution and reanimating radical traditions for this generation. As you have written, "In our present moment of multiple and overlapping crises, it is more important than ever that Black and Indigenous scholars engage in ceremonies of dreaming up how we might create futures together that are vibrant with livingness." Butler and other Black and Indigenous speculative fiction writers and world builders (such as N. K. Jemisin and Cherie Dimaline) rarely flinch from the necessity of violence and the unique ethical dilemmas it presents as they imagine more livable worlds. While I am not attempting to deliberate on the use violence by abolitionists, I am grateful for Butler's Black (feminist) radical imaginary in the *Parable* series that broaches the topic in a way that academics often cannot or will not. For many of my

students, *Parable of the Sower*, and Lauren Olamina's relationship to care, violence, and vulnerability felt like one of the only ethical texts that they read in fall of 2020.

I love the way you hold and read the text as well. I look forward to talking about our experiences sharing it with our Black and Indigenous students.

The Measure Between Self and Bad Poetry

by Megan Scribe

I fell in love in 2007 and bad poetry ensued.

*There is sediment residing inside of me.*⁴⁵

At eighteen years old, these were the words I had to describe the experience of allowing myself to be undone and reconfigured by another. When I could not bring myself to confess my feelings, somehow it seemed more appropriate to write a cringe-inducing love poem, submit it for publication in the school newspaper, and hand her a copy hot off the press.

After reading Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, I felt compelled to salvage this work from the sentimental depths.⁴⁶ What does a schoolgirl crush have to do with interdisciplinary studies? Well, everything actually. Guided by the force of shoals, King considers the theoretical and methodological possibilities that might open up if Black and Indigenous studies were to collide in her debut book.

A shoal is a geological formation and location that can be defined as a place where the water is of little depth.⁴⁷ Shoals are frequently described as sandbanks, bars, or coral reefs. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, King reveals, ship captains and crew regarded shoals with trepidation as they lacked the scientific knowledge and navigational equipment required to anticipate and avoid the geological formations. Even with the advancement of navigational technology, shoals remain unpredictable and somewhat paradoxical in nature. While the accumulation of sand, rocks, and other matter give these formations density and dimension, the shoal "exceeds full knowability/mappability."⁴⁸ A shoal is formidable in its ability to sink a ship and, yet, these formations are changeable and remain in a constant state of transformation.

King extends this discussion on shoals to Black thought. Just as shoals represent the dissolution of boundaries between land and water, the transformation of geographic terrain, and the friction of myriad forces, *The Black Shoals* represents an analytical site that compels Black and Indigenous scholars to pause. She asks: how might the theoretical and

methodological topography of Black and Indigenous studies be transformed by this meeting place?

*These divine particles which manifest
all that is conscious and hopeful,
present in my being.*

Black and Indigenous encounters are not new. As King put it elsewhere, "Certainly Black people have crossed the minds of Native scholars and Native life has interested the Black scholar."⁴⁹ There are many examples of collaboration and coalition between Black and Indigenous peoples within academia and activism across history. Although both Black and Indigenous peoples have borne the brunt of imperial domination, often by the same oppressors, efforts to maintain common ground have been fraught with disagreement and disappointment. In her dissertation, King has contemplated the "(im)possibility of a coalition between Black and Native Women."⁵⁰ Clearly there is mutual intrigue; however, fugitive flirtation and sustained commitment are two things entirely.

Taking *The Black Shoals* as the meeting place where boundaries are more readily dissolved, King urges Black and Indigenous studies scholars to consider the productive potential of erotic chaos in favor of coalition-building in the fourth chapter. In contemplating myriad relational possibilities, "Our Cherokee Uncles: Black and Native Erotics" serves as my starting point for imagining and working towards mutually fulfilling encounters between Black and Indigenous folks. In this chapter, King argues, "discourses of coalition often foreclose conversations about sex, erotics, and Black and Indigenous futures."⁵¹ Informed by Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic*, King invites Black and Indigenous scholars to explore the "measure between the beginnings of the sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings."⁵² Within this interstitial space, the dissolution of self through the absolute embodiment of shared ecstasy, suffering, joy, and chaos poses the potential to radically transform selfhood and nationhood. An important caveat, however, is that in order to experience the transformative power of erotic chaos, one must venture into the unknown, become undone, and refashioned.

*You are the current that runs through the river,
Disrupting and uniting the sand and water,
and inspiration swells within me.*

King is as pragmatic as she is poetic. When she states that decolonization requires plunging into the unknown depths of erotic chaos, she means it. This imperative is not naively issued by romanticism, but rather from the painfully acquired wisdom and experience of generational conflict, mutual betrayal, and persistent friction. To hold and

make space for the suffering of another, as erotic chaos necessitates, has always come with the fear of losing oneself for another.

When I first encountered King's scholarship in 2015, I was thinking deeply through Eve Tuck, Mistinguette Smith, Allison M. Guess, Tavia Benjamin, and Brian K. Jones' collaborative work on Black relationships to land. I was particularly struck by their experiences of collaboration. They elaborate, "contingent collaboration points to the ways that thresholds are not simply places of crossing from one state to another: They are places that demand pause to mark that passage . . . We had to engage these thresholds from different directions and widely different experiences."⁵³

Reading these two works with apparently drastic views on boundaries alongside one another allowed me to interpret erotic chaos with greater nuance and depth. Erotic chaos is not simply about collapsing difference for the sake of sameness. It is a commitment to generative tension and friction of difference. As King eloquently puts it, "the shared drum skin that beats out a new dance and the praising and calling forth of shared gods offer some of the most poignant moments, utterances, knots, kinetics, gestures, and modes of thinking about how the relations of conquest bring Black and Indigenous life into each other's folds."⁵⁴

When I shared the publication with my crush, I recall receiving some benign encouragement. While I was somewhat disappointed that my poem did not elicit the response I had initially (feared? desired?) anticipated, today I appreciate the work as a record earnestly attempting to describe the dissolution of the self into one's strongest feelings. In revisiting this work alongside King's *The Black Shoals*, I am reminded of both the thrill and inherent risk in knowing another. King does not promise that we will never make mistakes, hurt each other, or write bad poetry. She does, however, offer guidance for navigating these encounters with care while envisioning the generative possibilities of these intimate and interdisciplinary encounters.

Response from Tiffany Lethabo King

Dear Megan,

I love the way you take risks. When we talked on the phone last fall, you seemed like a practiced risk taker. And I am not surprised by your brazen attempt at 18 years old to share bad poetry with your schoolgirl crush.

I keep returning to our conversation about the possibility of our friendship and movement toward Black and Indigenous feminist relations as colleagues. That conversation, on a cold

fall night, has given us a ground of relation. At that time, there was a lot of risky territory to cross for us to have a place to land and fall (Recollect) to forge a connection.

At the time, I had not had a public conversation about my relationship with Andrea Smith. While I often talk to people about it, I do not provide statements, I do not give interviews, and I have not published about it (until now). Native and Indigenous feminists who I have a relationship with and who have been impacted by Andrea Smith's deception have shaped my response. I told you that I no longer have a relationship with Smith. We talked about my pain, your pain, other people's pain.

"The thrill and inherent risk in knowing another...we are not promised that...we will never make mistakes, hurt each other, or write bad poetry."

You were bold and deliberate about the potential of entering this space of "erotic chaos" with me. Lorde's gift, my words, your actions.

"Erotic chaos is not simply about collapsing difference for the sake of sameness. It is a commitment to generative tension and friction of difference."

I told you about my longing to have relationships with Indigenous feminists that are unmediated by relations of conquest. At so many turns, this desire is interrupted. At times it feels like a fantasy, or the immature wishes of a child. All relationships are mediated by their contexts. I have been reminded of this time and time again. The settler colonial bullshit will always get in the way. However, the way you attend to Lorde and encourage me to return to Lorde's Black feminist erotics at the scale of "tension" and "friction" remind me of something important.

Worthwhile friendship is in "the doing" which will inevitably produce tension and friction.

The doing of friendship is a risk. The risk mitigating impulse of the academy is organized to impede the brazenness of Indigenous and Black feminist relations. While we might have met in the academy's meeting rooms or hallways, at the conference, or in the pages of a special issue, the offshore risks we take on a fall night on the phone is "the doing" that matters. Being humbled by the scales at which friendship happens is a chaotic and beautiful thing. It is the risky friendships that I hope remain after "the Black and Indigenous Studies turn" and all its anthologies, syllabi, grants, and centers have crested and receded.

I'd rather have a phone call that we fit in on a cold fall night.

Be/stay well.

Notes

1. On "poethics," see Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81-97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413690> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413690>> . ↵
2. Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022). ↵
3. Charmaine Lurch, *Revisiting Sycorax*, 2015–19, mixed wire, dimensions variable. ↵
4. King, *Black Shoals*; Katherine McKittrick, "Introduction: Geographic Stories," in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxv. ↵
5. Pamela Edmonds, "Conversations in Flux: An Interview with Artist Charmaine Lurch," *Word: The Soul of Urban Culture*, 2015, <http://wordmag.com/conversations-in-flux-an-interview-with-artist-charmaine-lurch> < <http://wordmag.com/conversations-in-flux-an-interview-with-artist-charmaine-lurch/>> . ↵
6. King, *Black Shoals*, 184. ↵
7. King, *Black Shoals*, 189. ↵
8. Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). ↵
9. N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season: Every Age Must Come to an End* (New York: Orbit Hachette Book Group, 2015), 313. ↵
10. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 313. ↵
11. Caroline Monnet, *The Flow Between Hard Places*, 2019, ductal concrete, 243.8 × 121.9 × 61 cm. ↵
12. "Acquisition Alert!," Art Gallery of Ontario, June 9, 2021, <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/acquisition-alert> < <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/acquisition-alert>> . ↵
13. Tanya Lukin Linklater, "Gestures That Remember and Insist" (keynote address), Maamwizing 2018 Pursuing Indigenous Research in a Good Way, Laurentian University, Sudbury, ON, November 17, 2018). ↵
14. King, *Black Shoals*, 4. ↵
15. King, *Black Shoals*, 4. ↵
16. Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53. ↵
17. King, *Black Shoals*, 157. ↵
18. Michael Belmore, *Édifice*, 2019, River Boulders, copper, 485.3 kg. ↵
19. Michael Belmore et al., "Exploring Black and Indigenous Futurisms: Rock as Witness," Panel, AGO and Hart House, February 28, 2022. ↵
20. Michael Belmore, "Édifice," 2019, stone and copper, <https://michaelbelmore.com/edifice> < <https://michaelbelmore.com/edifice>> . ↵
21. Ashon Crawley, "Otherwise Movements," *New Inquiry*, January 19, 2015, <https://thenewinquiry.com/otherwise-movements> < <https://thenewinquiry.com/otherwise-movements>> . ↵
22. King, *Black Shoals*, 2–4. ↵

23. King, *Black Shoals*, xv. ↵
24. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Extraction: Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," Antipode Institute for Geographies of Justice, Johannesburg, South Africa, June 22, 2015. ↵
25. King, *Black Shoals*, 31. ↵
26. King, *Black Shoals*, 69. ↵
27. King, *Black Shoals*, 84. ↵
28. King, *Black Shoals*, 46. ↵
29. King, *Black Shoals*, 192. ↵
30. King, *Black Shoals*, 191. ↵
31. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Colonialism/Capitalism/Resistance," in *Revolutionary Feminisms*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020), 142. ↵
32. Simpson, "Colonialism/Capitalism/Resistance," 143 ↵
33. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 230. ↵
34. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 229. ↵
35. Jodi A. Byrd, "What's Normative Got to Do with It?: Toward Indigenous Queer Relationality," *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020): 105–23, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8680466> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8680466>> . ↵
36. King, *Black Shoals*, 46. ↵
37. Katherine McKittrick, "Diachronic Loops/Deadweight Tonnage/Bad Made Measure," *Cultural Geographies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474015612716> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474015612716>> . ↵
38. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. G. T. Johnson and A. Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 227. ↵
39. Gilmore, "Abolition Geography," 231. ↵
40. Dylan Rodriguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6 (2019): 1575. ↵
41. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000), 12. ↵
42. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 2–3. ↵
43. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 77. ↵
44. King, *Black Shoals*, 209. ↵
45. Megan Bertasson, *The Current* (Toronto: Excalibur Publications, 2008). ↵
46. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). ↵
47. "shoal, n. 1". OED Online. June 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/178378> < <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/178378>> . ↵
48. King, *Black Shoals*, 3. ↵
49. Tiffany Jeannette King, "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 14. ↵

50. King, *In the Clearing*, 21. ↩
51. King, *Black Shoals*, 148. ↩
52. King, *Black Shoals*, 144. ↩
53. Eve Tuck, Mistinguet Smith, Allison M. Guess, Tavia Benjamin, and Brian K. Jones, "Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and Contingent Collaboration," *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2014.3.1.52> <
<https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2014.3.1.52>> . ↩
54. King, *Black Shoals*, 200. ↩
-

Author Information

Tiffany Lethabo King

Tiffany Lethabo King holds the Barbara And John Glynn Research Professorship in Democracy and Equity and is Associate Professor of Women, Gender & Sexuality at the University of Virginia. Her work is animated by abolitionist and decolonial traditions within Black studies and Native/Indigenous studies. They are the author of *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Duke University Press, 2020), which won the Lora Romero First Book Prize. She also co-edited *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism* (Duke University Press, 2021).

[View all of Tiffany Lethabo King's articles.](#)

Stephanie Latty

Stephanie Latty is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at Toronto Metropolitan University. She received her PhD from the University of Toronto in the Collaborative Women and Gender Studies Program in the Department of Social Justice Education. Stephanie's areas of interest include Black feminisms, anti-Blackness, carcerality, gendered violence, and abolition. Her current research examines the media and legal discourses surrounding Black women and girls who have experienced strip-searching and other forms of state violence in Canada. Most recently, Stephanie's work has been published in the *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal* (with Megan Scribe, Alena Peters, and Anthony Morgan) and *The Lauryn Hill Reader* (with Sefanit Habtom and Eve Tuck).

[View all of Stephanie Latty's articles.](#)

Stephanie Lumsden

Stephanie Lumsden (Hupa) received her Bachelor's degree in Women's Studies from Portland State University in 2011 and her Master's degree in Native American Studies from the University of California, Davis in 2014. She earned her second Master's degree in Gender Studies in 2018. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Gender Studies department at UCLA and a recipient of the Ford dissertation fellowship. Her dissertation project examines the relationship between ongoing Indigenous dispossession and carceral statecraft in California.

[View all of Stephanie Lumsden's articles.](#)

Karyn Recollet

Karyn Recollet is a diasporic Cree and faculty member of the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto.

[View all of Karyn Recollet's articles.](#)

Megan Scribe

Megan Scribe is Ininiw iskwew from Norway House Cree Nation. She is an interdisciplinary Indigenous feminist researcher, writer, and educator. Her award-winning dissertation, *Indigenous Girlhood: Narratives of Colonial Care in Law and Literature*, examines how legal and literary narratives shape knowledge on violence against Indigenous girls living under settler colonialism. Scribe's research interests include Indigeneity, systems of power and oppression, and Indigenous worlding through speculative fiction and poetic inquiry. Scribe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Ryerson X University, an Associate Research Fellow with Yellowhead Institute, and a Council Member for Aboriginal Legal Services' Community Council Diversion Program.

[View all of Megan Scribe's articles.](#)

Article details

Tiffany Lethabo King, Stephanie Latty, Stephanie Lumsden, Karyn Recollet, and Megan Scribe, and edited by Beenash Jafri, "The Black Shoals Dossier," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.5>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

With Grief and Joy — Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry, Part II

by Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT This second installment of “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” opens with a reflection on transformative access and its visioning work. We weave this discussion through not only the eight new pieces found within this issue, but also through a reflection on the practices of access and care that enabled the writing, editing, and publication process itself. We conclude with two artifacts: The first is the “Accessible Knowledge Production Manifesto” that emerged as a collectively authored set of demands generated at a workshop we held in connection to the launch of our first installment of “Crip Pandemic Life.” The second is a link to a resource list, “Continuing Threads and Proliferations; Crip Pandemic Life Archive,” compiled by Corbin Outlaw, which links out to other pandemic projects documenting crip, disabled, chronically-ill, mad, and neurodivergent experiences, particularly highlighting experiences not captured within our tapestry of crip pandemic life.

KEYWORDS autoethnography, disability, publishing, archive, pandemic, access, disability culture

From Gathering Evidence to Transformative Access

“Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” started from a call for papers that yielded two special sections across both this and the preceding issue (11.2 and 12.1). The project contains twenty-three pieces (eight of which are found here), two introductions (including this one), and an introductory roundtable. It reflects three years of work, fittingly marking the years of the ongoing pandemic. Through the process of this project—collecting, collaborating, curating, editing, and reading—we have learned a lot. We have learned a lot about access and accessibility across a number of registers, and this has underscored the vital intersections of evidence, access, archive, and culture. As such, we elaborate the evolution of our thinking about the project below, from archiving evidence, to understanding it more deeply through the lens of access work that builds transformative cultural space.

With our call and our first editorial introduction, we began this project with the commitment to gather evidence, taking up Mia Mingus's injunction that

We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other. Evidence of who we were, who we thought we were, who we never should have been. Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live—past survival; past isolation.¹

In reflecting on this collection and project as a whole, the closing line of this oft-cited passage, "*Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live—past survival; past isolation*" is particularly resonant. In the process of collecting and engaging with the work of "*Crip Pandemic Life*," we came to understand the project as a form of *cultural* access and visioning work. We read Mingus's words as a call for sites of disability culture-making..

In the evolving stages of the pandemic, the chances of moving past survival and isolation for disabled and chronically-ill folks has been variously and acutely imperiled. This reality continues to serve as an impetus for the work of archiving and evidencing crip life, joy, and grief during the pandemic. As our contributors note, even moments where isolation and barriers to survival were temporarily relieved (through things like virtual participation options and state and federal funding increases), these changes were framed as provisional. Indeed, many have been reverted, driving home a retrenched ableism, making isolation more apparent and painful.

In our introductory roundtable "*Crip Pandemic Conservation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes*," Sandie Yi's comment of "wow, this is an amazing collection of recipes," set off sparks of recognition among participants (and made its way into our title for the roundtable), as we thought about the implications of this collection as *recipes composing and weaving, melding "flavors o[f] disability culture."*² Reflecting more deeply on this metaphor led us to understand the collection of evidence and creation of an archive as intrinsically also about access—access to culture, identity, validation, and community. For readers and community members, the contributions to "*Crip Pandemic Life*" compose a tapestry of heterogeneously woven threads of life and of culture that serve as recipes for how to cope, relate, navigate, and exist. In other words, each piece instantiates a synthesis of access and archive. Each piece demonstrates ways to hold space for oneself and one's community members at the same time as it bears witness to a moment in time, to loss, grief, and to individual and community actions taken in response to these.

Our work with "*Crip Pandemic Life*" has made apparent to us that there can be a transformative mutuality of evidence and access in the moment and process of archiving; particularly when creating an archive centered on the values of evidence and access. As Aimi Hamraie describes it, access work is "culturally productive and transformative. And it

leaves evidence. For example, when we transcribe something, that leaves evidence: we can archive that. We develop different tools and techniques for producing access according to the kinds of spaces and opportunities that we're working within."³ These techniques and tools are, themselves, part of the archival work that we hope "Crip Pandemic Life" contributes to. As such, we include in this introduction not only a discussion of the pieces found within this section of "Crip Pandemic Life," but also a reflection of the access work we undertook, starting with a recognition: Access work is hard work, and takes time, (physical and emotional) labor, and commitment. For both us as editor/curator/stewards and for the contributors, it requires attention to the material conditions under which intellectual and community-building labor happens as well as to the bodyminds undertaking that labor. Disability studies and composition scholars Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau argue in their discussion of transformational access that "when access is only a question of texts—products divorced from labor/ers—those individuals seeking access are positioned as consumers, as bodies in need of help from those more abled and privileged."⁴ To counter this approach to access, they suggest a clear differentiation between "consumptive access" and "transformational access." The difference, they contend, lies in shifting from an approach that allows "people to enter a space" to one that questions and rethinks "the very construct of allowing."⁵ Through this epistemological shift, transformational access participates in a reshaping and reinvention of culture. This rethinking of access that Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau invoke, and that Mingus, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Sins Invalid call for in their writings, requires that we reckon with the relational positions involved in access work.⁶ It demands a commitment to laterality, mutuality, and an openness to transformation. As we discuss in greater detail below, we have witnessed the effects of such transformative access at work in the paratextual and marginal elements of the collection, and the pieces that run across both sections of "Crip Pandemic Life" bear witness to these transformative, joyful, creative, community-building, and access-archival traces.

The contributions within the "Crip Pandemic Life" project also detail and honor the labor and experiential expertise often required of transformational access. To attend to this aspect of the work, one thread that we also want to tease out, explicitly, is the autoethnographic process of culture-in-the-making. *Autoethnography* refers to creative and written work that weaves self-reflection and an accounting of one's experiences that specifically relate to documenting the way in which a particular culture operates.⁷ Understanding the contributions to "Crip Pandemic Life" as also necessarily autoethnographic works helps to illuminate the significance of access work and archive creation to disability culture. "Crip Pandemic Life" contributors explicitly and implicitly situate themselves and their experiences, creative work, essays, and/or scholarly activities within and in relation to crip culture and community. The works weave cultural analysis with experience in such a way that they are writing the cultural archive from within—themselves

embedded in the cultural tapestry. In one sense, “Crip Pandemic Life” is a cultural time capsule of the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–21). The voices that responded to the call draw from their experiences and their cultural critique in such a way that the pieces also document crip life and culture that extend endlessly on either side of this period. A transformative access archive (and/as culture capsule) thus at once capacitates, evidences, and requires a centering of disability culture and knowledge production.

The Pieces

In this issue/installment, readers will find eight contributions to the “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry” collection. We have five essays, which grapple with issues of precarity, harm, loss, grief, and memory work. Alongside this, readers will find three praxis pieces which document issues of access, care work, mutuality, testimony, joy, play, and desire. Of the five essays, two are collectively authored essays. In “Only Together We Flourish: The Importance of Friendship and Care in Navigating Anti-Asian Hate and Shielding During COVID-19,” the alchemy of access intimacy is palpable as Sophie Savage and Denise Wong share how their relationship has sustained them in navigating the early pandemic period full of triggers and traumas for both, involving complex “otherings” and exacerbations of vulnerability.⁸ In their essay, “The Place and Pace to Remember: Keeping What the Pandemic Has Given Us,” Ria DasGupta, Liz Lopez, and Emily Nusbaum reflect on how their communal memory work during the early pandemic years served as a healing and justice-building process. The three authors reflect specifically on moments of transformative access dreaming with the late Stacey Park Milbern, and elaborate how, in an untenable and deeply ableist context, the methodologies of disability justice—and its ethos of community and culture—offer a space of interdependence and hope. In doing so, they map reimaged relations to academia through an “ethics of pace” and memory work as resistant utopic praxis. Both of these co-authored essays bend the genre with distinctly conversational elements, where each author contributes a distinct self-authored part, which gives an effect of weaving a tapestry of voices and experiences—micro-tapestries within “Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry.”

Caroline He, Kim Fernandes, and Hailee Yoshizaki-Gibbons’s individual essay contributions document graduate student experiences, from the coursework stages of graduate study (He), to field work (Fernandes), to the completion of a dissertation and its dedication (Yoshizaki-Gibbons). These essays both document and offer “crip wisdom recipes” of how to live and work as graduate students while grappling with grief, madness, and disability in the context of the pandemic and the restriction of movement and interaction. He’s essay, entitled “600 mg of Lithium, Quarantine, and ‘Third-Spaces,’” theorizes the experience of

bipolar II disorder during lockdown in relation to scholarly theories of space, shedding light on the vernacular of “headspace” while also engaging in a radical mad imagining beyond binaries, and beyond the division of private and collective experience. Fernandes’s “For Graduate Students, When the Sadness is Unbelievable: How to Research and Write If We Must Write When the World is on Fire,” engages in a “patchwork” of autoethnography with her fieldwork and “think[s] from grief, engaging with disabled graduate students’ experiences of the pandemic to discuss what it might mean to hold work alongside grief alongside work.” Yoshizaki-Gibbons’s essay, “The Dedication: Life, Death, Grief, and Remembrance During COVID-19,” echoes threads from both of these essays, working through mad discourse and autoethnography while also writing from grief, memorializing an institutionalized elder with whom she engaged during her fieldwork, who died during the pandemic.

Beyond the essays are three pieces that we have categorized as praxis projects: Bethany Stevens and Sara Palmer’s “Corona Look of the Day,” Aimi Hamraie and moira williams’s “Remote Access: A Crip Night Life Party,” and the crowd-sourced Instagram zine “DISTORIES” are all works that serve as micro-archives in and of themselves, documenting access and care work taken up in the context of the pandemic and crip life and experience. Stevens and Palmer’s contribution documents daily Instagram posts that involve Stevens “serving looks” as a defiant and sexy project of crip pleasure in the face of eugenic discourse and practices around disabled folks. Hamraie and williams’s contribution documents inventive and joyful access-oriented all-virtual and hybrid gatherings and parties initiated and organized by disability culture researchers, designers, and artists, including Kevin Gotkin, charles eppley, Teresa Suh, Finnegan Shannon, Ezra Benus, Margaret Louise Fink, Sasha Kurlenkova, Yo-Yo Lin, Joushua Halstead, and Louise Hickman, in addition to Hamraie and williams. “Remote Access: A Crip Night Life Party” not only documents the parties themselves, but archives many of the access practices that organizers engaged in. Finally, DISTORIES models a different sort of visibility and access. Each chapter of the DISTORIES zine is introduced by a question, gathering a range of testimonies, from painful interpersonal losses and ruptures in trust and community to stories of interdependence and care; from cries of rage to scathing cultural criticism in the shape of specific demands; from expressions of affirmation and solidarity to calls and visions for radical new worlds.

We want to honor the particularly hard work of returning to spaces of trauma for the sake of leaving evidence. For the sake of community, care, and visibility, many contributors to “Crip Pandemic Life” revisited incredibly dark, challenging, triggering times, and some authors share explicitly that they are writing from and through grief. Grief is indeed a building-block of crip world-making, in a generative way. As J. Logan Smilges puts it in a forthcoming book, *Crip Negativity*, “We can’t change the world for the better until we allow

ourselves to feel the depth of our grief.”⁹ This still does not make it easy, pleasant, or any less triggering to revisit and write, document, preserve, and share this. And yet, it does afford us the opportunity to be together—as Sophie Savage and Denise Wong cite from Mingus’s blog post-essay on access intimacy—“knowing that someone else is with me in this mess.”

Accessible Publishing

In the same spirit of collaboration and collectivity that runs throughout “Crip Pandemic Life,” we turn now to a discussion of a workshop that we held in February 2023. With our ongoing collaborator, Margaret Fink, we held a hybrid Accessible Publishing Workshop where we invited folks to a discussion about access and institutional barriers within knowledge production. Hosted by the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Illinois Chicago and supported by Corbin Outlaw, we used the first special section of “Crip Pandemic Life” as a launching point to lay out and grapple with some of the challenges of integrating access and care practices into academic publishing and editing. We invited participants to consider questions of power, privilege, accountability, conflicting access needs, and survival within academia across varying institutional roles. We approached the questions that these challenges raise from a presumption of desire: desire for care and access, and desire to create practices that open more space for disabled and chronically ill writers, artists, and activists who want and/or need their work to circulate within academic journals.

The infrastructure of academic publishing is just one of the many mechanisms that shape and limit who enters, survives, and thrives within higher educational spaces. As such, it is a key space where ableism (along with overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression) operates. Disabled and chronically-ill people and our allies working across disciplinary and institutional spaces continue to bring access practices into greater visibility to address these barriers in the service of creating and holding more space for disabled, sick, and mad thinkers and knowers.¹⁰ Yet, as disability studies scholar and rhetorician Jay T. Dolmage notes, “The steep steps of higher education will not easily be torn down or ramped over.”¹¹ Academic ableism has deep roots, and working against it is an ongoing, collective process. The goal of our workshop, then, was to dream, collectively, about the practices that have and will enable more folks to submit their work and see that work through a peer-review and publication process. In short, we sought to hold space for resource-sharing, collective demand-making, and plan-making for how to enact those demands.

We began the workshop by sharing some of the steps we took to center access in our editorial work and the lessons we learned in the process of publishing “Crip Pandemic Life.”

That discussion led to a conversation about the experiences that workshop participants have had with academic publishing and/or receiving feedback about their work. We asked folks to reflect on the work that they wanted scholarly publishing to accomplish and what access in knowledge production looks and feels like. We split up into smaller groups (several zoom rooms, and those in the physical space worked as a group). We invited everyone to take notes on a shared google doc and came together to report back on some of the brainstorming that took place in our breakout rooms/spaces. We then crowdsourced a working document that captured these reflections and shared strategies for addressing access barriers within publishing, writing, curating, and producing knowledge. The workshop culminated in a list of questions and demands for scholars, editors, publishers, and institutions (or, more specifically, those responsible for setting academic institutional policies) to consider in their work. Below, we reproduce (and add to) our opening comments, workshop questions, and these collective demands as a means of archiving that discussion and amplifying the access visioning work that happened within the workshop space.

On Editing “Crip Pandemic Life”

At the end of the day, a collection edited by two disabled and chronically-ill people required a much more interdependent process, as we navigated various bodymind crises and flares, respectively. This meant that at different times and for different components of the project, we stepped in for each other. Add to this, a set of explicitly solicited and variously disabled contributors, and we found ourselves working with multiple and expansive deadlines for both ourselves and our contributors. Further, the ongoing pandemic context has made (and continues to make) the unremunerated exercise of peer review even more fraught: there were less people with the capacity to do peer review, and many folks with the expertise to review our collection were feeling the strains of crip pandemic life themselves.¹² We took, and offered, more time, many times.

Thanks to the flexibility of the team at *Lateral*, we negotiated some of the more immutable timelines that the journal is obliged to keep to and we ultimately split our collection across two issues. This enabled some of our contributors—and peer reviewers—who needed more time to have it. In reflecting on the process of negotiating these deadlines and extensions, we are reminded of the observation, made by James Kyung-Jin Lee and shared with us by Mimi Khúc in “Crip Pandemic Conversations” that rigor must be tender.¹³ Flexibility and generous review and editing deadlines are one way we hope that this tenderness found its way into the process of supporting the rigor of the work.

Yet, we feel it important to also name some of the ways where our aspirations to implement this flexibility ran into challenges. At the risk of stating the obvious, the process of moving

pieces through the submission, editing, reviewing, and publication stages involves a lot of people. Managing or moving deadlines in one place within this chain of operations impacts others. We eventually ran out of time, and we struggled, at times, to reserve some of this tenderness for ourselves. We set a three-day window to read finalized pieces for the first issue, a window that coincided with conference travel commitments and put us both in the position of “super-cripping” the final stages of our work in ways that felt counter to the ethos of the project.¹⁴ While the *Lateral* team met our final push to get the first special section to print with nothing but generosity and willing flexibility, we also know that the labor on their end was equally compressed. We inadvertently borrowed time from one end of the publishing timeline to support another, and we stretched ourselves and others as a result. When disabled and chronically-ill folks are working at multiple points within the publication chain—something we undoubtedly want to see more of—the balancing of needs and capacities gets more complicated and requires more resource sharing, strategizing, and open conversations about the labor of and within publishing. This resource sharing is all the more crucial within the labor conditions of academia and (most) academic publishing, where any “extra” time required to carve out spaces for flexibility and access is tacitly understood as labor done out of “love,” “commitment,” and “passion” rather than anything that would require structural support.¹⁵ At the same time, we affirm that this *has* been a labor of love—solidarity and access as love (Mingus); and care work (Piepzna-Samarasinha), where the very rhetorical linking of care and work by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha demand a different cultural orientation towards this type of work.¹⁶

The collection of essays, creative works, and projects within “Crip Pandemic Life” also required a more flexible approach to editing and peer-review processes. Thinking about the placement of creative work next to theoretical texts and descriptions of pandemic projects felt like curation as much as editorial work. We learned from and relied on the expertise of Sandy Guttman, a Chicago-based curator and cultural worker, to help bridge over our lack of experience in this type of work.¹⁷ Some of the contributions also blended styles or genres of writing, not falling into squarely scholarly or personal-essay conventions. This required identifying modes of narrative and citational politics that were ethical, caring, and accountable. We were mindful, for instance, that some pieces required more citational depth than others and sought to balance a commitment to honoring genealogies of ideas without enforcing scholarly demands for citationality on pieces that fell more into creative practices or blended genres.¹⁸

We understood and approached this editorial work as components of access work. Disabled and chronically-ill thinkers and cultural workers often have to or prefer to experiment with and work across genres, methods, or techniques in our work because of the unique needs of our bodyminds.¹⁹ Therefore, knowing how to support the evaluation of this work through the peer-review process is a necessary part of holding space for crip

knowledge production. It is also a part of the process that, we admit, was one of the most challenging to navigate.²⁰

Finally, creating space for artists, activists, and interdisciplinary scholars to share their work requires anticipating and welcoming *readership* from similar positionalities and experiences. Intentionally thinking about a broader readership for work that showcases artists, activists, and community work ensures we are not inviting folks into inhospitable and/or inaccessible academic spaces in extractive ways. To this end, we integrated feedback on accessible language and text-navigation into our editorial suggestions by encouraging explicit roadmapping, concept definitions, and the use of subheadings. All contributors provided alt-text descriptions of any visual material, and we encouraged content flags for potentially triggering aspects of the contributor's work. We also secured funding for and time in the lead-up to the publication for a screen reader user to test the navigability of the collection. An institutionally-supported digital accessibility expert also provided invaluable consultation support in our publication of the issue.

The inclusion of "Crip Pandemic Conversations: Textures, Tools, and Recipes" as a conversation was another example of thinking broadly about readership and building flexibility into the form of the issue. Scholars and creative knowledge-producers participated in a recorded roundtable conversation. By posting the entire recording, along with captions and an unedited transcript, we offered several possible entry points into the collection for our readers/viewers/listeners. For those who might prefer a smoother text-based or text-only experience, we also rendered a lightly edited version of the transcript.

In reviewing the conversation, we also realized that the embeddedness of each of the participants within disability studies, disability culture, and/or disability justice work meant that the discussion reflected a shared vocabulary that some of our readers/listeners/viewers may not be familiar with. Shorthand and expert language can simultaneously present barriers *and* reflect a precious expertise worth retaining, particularly within fields that centralize minoritized subjects. Calls to centralize access in knowledge production do not preclude the use of expertise, insider language, or concepts that have rich, complicated, and/or contested histories. Thus, we created a glossary of key terms for audiences who may not have experiences with or access to the bodies of work that the conversation (or the collection as a whole) gestures towards.

We asked Corbin Outlaw, who led this effort, to reflect on their work during the workshop. They shared the following:

Ultimately, we wanted to complement, consider, and care for the many ways of knowing (or not-knowing), crip and otherwise. We set out to use the glossary to create or shape a

space for a freedom or flux of knowledge based in or inspired by discussions of what care means (or can mean) in spaces of knowledge production.

I like to talk about how things "feel" and for me, this glossary is like a waterbed, or a big bean bag chair to sit in while you read or listen. There was a lot of intentionality with drawing from practices like plain-language, and an active practice of a crip citational politic.

The creation of the glossary was also an extremely collaborative process of knowledge production, drafting and finalizing and citing the glossary, as we all located these terms in conversation as well as in current and past discourses, and through our own scholarly work and experiences. A lot of it felt like almost a scavenger hunt through overlapping epistemologies and was honestly pretty fun.

We wanted to be clear and intentional in tracing the genealogies of knowledge and honoring work that has been done, while at the same time developing the glossary as a clear entry point for readers, which means that it operates as an incomplete thing. By nature, the glossary is tied temporally (figuratively and literally to the issue and discussions happening several months ago), but imagined as an endlessly experiential unraveling of an archive (we hope).

Part of the collaborative process that Outlaw describes involved asking contributors who used terms in the conversation to weigh in on the glossary definitions. We also included time stamps to link to in the glossary terms so readers can return to the video to hear terms discussed in context.

The efforts that we trace here are just some of the ways readers will find evidence of access and care within "Crip Pandemic Life." Our contributors present a range of collaborative projects that model innovative forms of producing, capturing, and sharing crip knowledge. From roundtables to memory-work, zine-making, found poetry, social-media archives, and descriptions of night-life parties, we want to underscore the ways that crip pandemic life has both relied on and occasioned crip innovation which, among other things, has contributed invaluable access knowledge, practices, and visioning. It is through our aim to further explore and experiment with the culture-shifting capacity that conceiving of access work as also knowledge production (and vice versa) that we also asked our workshop participants to share some of their experiences, concerns, and dreams for the future of access in academic publishing. We pulled these thoughts together, added a few of our own, and present them here in manifesto form. We hope readers will find this list of demands and visioning as generative and energizing as we do.

Accessible Knowledge Production Manifesto

By Margaret Fink, Theodora Danylevich, Alyson Patsavas, Corbin Outlaw, Beth Bendtsen, Jennie Brier, Sydney Erlikh, Erin Gizewski, Lieke van Heumen, Kate Jirik, Clare Mullaney, Tirza Ochrach-Konrad, Lisseet Perez, Sheryl Peters, Bailey Szustak, Claire Van Den Helder, and all of those who took part in the conversation anonymously.

Accessible knowledge production is flexible timetables.

Accessible knowledge production is the availability of support in the planning for and managing of deadlines.

Accessible knowledge production is creating, holding, and protecting space for slow scholarship.

Accessible knowledge production is valuing process over product.

Accessible knowledge production is valuing experiential knowledge.

Accessible knowledge production is integrating practices of care throughout the writing and publishing process, including structural support, mentorship, and concrete commitments to accessibility.

Accessible knowledge production is substituting plain language summaries for abstracts.

Accessible knowledge production is valuing work and expertise *both* financially *and* through anticapitalist practices (community-building, care labor, and other non financial supports).

Accessible knowledge production is creativity and flexibility of form.

Accessible knowledge production is understanding conversations, art, artist talks, digital storytelling, poetry, zine-making, and performances of everyday life as knowledge production.

Accessible knowledge production inclusive research teams with co-researchers who identify as having intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Accessible knowledge production is the security and privileges of tenure-track lines extended to non-tenure track positions.

Accessible knowledge production is shared tenure-track lines.

Accessible knowledge production is disabled and chronically-ill people on editorial boards, implementing practices that support other disabled and chronically-ill people.

Accessible knowledge production is dismantling structural oppression within the creation, publication, and distribution of knowledge.

Accessible knowledge production is knowledge produced by, for, and with communities impacted by that knowledge.

Accessible knowledge production is valuing the work of knowledge translation and amplification.

Accessible knowledge production is building infrastructures that support interdependent scholarship.

Accessible knowledge production is attention to and support for the labor that enables access.

Continuing Threads and Proliferations: Crip Pandemic Life Archive

Finally, in the editorial introduction to our first installment, we noted some palpable absences in the collection. We wanted to address this with more than just words. The following link takes readers to a list of resources that seek to amplify, honor, acknowledge, and make visible projects and works by groups that weren't well-represented in the submissions we did receive and curate within the "Crip Pandemic Life" project. This list is by no means exhaustive. We chose to house it in a Google Doc to allow for additions and welcome anyone to make "suggestions" within the document to add their resources. The pandemic goes on. The need to archive the experiences and knowledges of disabled, mad, chronically-ill, neurodivergent and crip lives goes on.

Crip Pandemic Life Continuing Threads and Proliferations <

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lAg81bevHbK5PJLGjXNXaPgbnUiOZmzCCxgpiZCBkkE/edit>>

Acknowledgements

Like all scholarship, this tapestry-archive-project was supported by a team of collaborators. "Crip Pandemic Life" would not have been possible without Sandy Guttman's expertise in accessible curation and her participation in the earlier stages of conceptualization and planning (not to mention indispensable work in processing submissions as they first came in); "Crip Pandemic Life" owes its existence also to

Margaret Fink. In addition to her role as the Director of the Disability Cultural Center and co-PI on the grants that funded this project, Margaret lent her expertise throughout the writing, editing, and publishing process. Corbin Outlaw's work as the graduate assistant on the project was invaluable and included everything from citation checks to the substantive contributions of both the glossary and the Google Doc resource guide. Margaret and Corbin both acted as access doulas throughout the project (including their work on both the workshop and the "Crip Pandemic Conversations" discussion.²¹ We also want to acknowledge and thank the *Lateral* team for their willingness to dream and enact "Crip Pandemic Life," and for their patience with our process. To our contributors—all of them across both issues—we would like to express our deep reverence for your care, and honor the varieties of pain involved in (first, living, then) generating and conveying this content into our stewardship.

Notes

1. Mia Mingus, *Leaving Evidence* (blog), <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com> > . ↩
2. Alyson Patsavas, Theodora Danylevich, Margaret Fink, Aimi Hamraie, Mimi Khúc, Sandie Yi, and Corbin Outlaw, "Crip Pandemic Conversation: Textures, Tools, and Recipes," *Lateral* 11, no. 2 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.6> < <https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.6> > . ↩
3. Patsavas, et al., "Crip Pandemic Conversation." ↩
4. Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau, "Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies," *Composition Studies* 42, no. 2 (2014): 151–54; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43501861> < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43501861> > . Similarly, Mia Mingus offers the conceptualization of liberatory access as something that is radically transformative, and specifically, culturally and socially transformative where and when "access can be a tool to challenge ableism, ablebodied supremacy, independence and exclusion." Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), April 11, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> > . ↩
5. Brewer, Selfe and Yergeau, "Creating a Culture of Access," 153–4. ↩
6. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence, and Disability Justice," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), April 11, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> > , Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), Sins Invalid, *Skin Tooth and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Sins Invalid, 2019). ↩
7. See, for example, Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arther P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589> < <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589> > . These scholars offer a helpful overview, drawing on Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Bud H. L. Goodall's *Writing the New Ethnography*, and bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, among others. ↩
8. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: the Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence* (blog), May 5, 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> <

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>> . ↵

9. This is an excerpt from Smilges's forthcoming book. J. Logan Smilges, *Crip Negativity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2023). ↵
10. Toolkits and resource guides for integrating accessibility into event planning, curricular practices, and evaluation tools continue to evolve and circulate. In hosting this workshop (and describing it here), we wanted to bring these conversations into the realm of academic publishing. See, for instance, Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, "Crip Technoscience Manifesto," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.29607>; Ann Fox, "How to Crip the Undergraduate Classroom: Lessons from Performance, Pedagogy, and Possibility," *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 21, no. 1 (2010): <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ888643.pdf>. ↵
11. Jay T. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 190. ↵
12. At the same time that we critique the problematic cultural/structural undertones that inform these categories of "labor of love," we are grateful to the community of reviewers who supported this collection and know that labor was one of solidarity and offered with care. ↵
13. "But rigor can be—and, indeed, must be—tender." James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Pedagogies of Woundedness: Illness, Memoir, and the Ends of the Model Minority* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022), 24. ↵
14. The supercrip is a cultural figure that represents and reproduces the disability stereotypes of inspiration, where the disabled person (or character) overcomes the limitations that their disability or impairment presents; see Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 35. ↵
15. Again, we want to be super clear here that the editorial collective of *Lateral* has modeled an approach to academic publishing that counters this rigid view of access and flexibility. The compressed timeline led to less space for our own access needs, instantiating the structural and institutional culture of rigidity and non-tender rigor. This is a scenario in access work that plays out frequently within disability community spaces. We hope that naming and talking about it opens space for collective conversations about balancing complex access needs and learning how to not internalize these failures as problems of self-management but structural issues. ↵
16. Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); See also Akemi Nishida's discussion of care practices and her theorization of "just care"; Akemi Nishida, *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2022), 7. ↵
17. Sandy worked with us in the early stages of the project and we regretfully did not note her contributions in our introduction to the first special section. We want to take the opportunity to amplify Sandy's work here by noting that she and Todd Garon recently opened a gallery space in Chicago called *Curb Appeal*. If you find yourself in Chicago, please visit their gallery space; "Home," Curb Appeal Gallery, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.curbappeal.gallery/home> < <https://www.curbappeal.gallery/home> > . The following article also describes the deliberate work that Guttman and Garon have done to build access into their gallery and highlight the work of disabled artists as well as to build disability culture; see Hannah Edgar, "Curb Appeal, a New Apartment Gallery, Brings Access to the Fore," *Chicago Reader*, March 17, 2023, <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/curb-appeal-a-new-apartment-gallery-brings-access-to-the-fore/> < <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/curb-appeal-a-new-apartment-gallery-brings-access-to-the-fore/> > . ↵
18. We are extremely grateful to our reviewers for their expertise during the evaluation process to help us and our contributors navigate this aspect of the review process. ↵
19. We are particularly grateful to have learned from Carrie Sandahl's work and leadership in disability arts and cultural spaces, including her work with Carol Gill on the barriers disabled artists face when their work crosses mediums and genres due to things like disability progression. This can create specific barriers to funding, professional development, and skill-building. See Carol Gill and Carrie Sandahl, "Arts Careers Outcomes and Opportunities for

Americans with Disabilities: A Qualitative Study" (Conference Report, National Endowment for the Arts National Summit on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities, July 8th, 2009), <https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/2009neasummit/papers.html> < <https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/2009neasummit/papers.html>> . ↩

20. This process often felt like it relied on knowledge gained through informal networks and mentoring relationships, further underscoring the importance of openly discussing how to build networks of crip and critical disability mentorship. Here, we want to draw attention to the recently launched project, Society of Disabled Oracles, a project by Alice Wong, Aimi Hamraie, and Jen White-Johnson. Though academic publishing is not the target intervention of this group, the project names the importance of crip wisdom and disabled mentorship and provides a platform to share that knowledge. See, Society of Disabled Oracles, 2022, <https://societyofdisabledoracles.com> < <https://societyofdisabledoracles.com/>> . ↩
21. An access doula is a role that has emerged in disability culture, where a community member takes on a supportive role to facilitate access—this can take quite a range of forms. ↩

Author Information

Theodora Danylevich

Theodora Danylevich is a scholar of American Literature and Disability Studies and also teaches first year writing. Her book project conceptualizes "[Sic]k Archives" and explores crip worldmaking and/as reproductive justice through a literary-historical lens. Their scholarly writing has appeared in *Lateral*, *Rhizomes*, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, and *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*.

[View all of Theodora Danylevich's articles.](#)

Alyson Patsavas

Alyson Patsavas is Assistant Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC). Her scholarship is situated at the intersections of disability studies, queer theory, and feminist theory and focuses on cultural discourses of pain, disability, and crip epistemologies, as well as representations of disability and chronic illness in popular culture. Patsavas is a writer and producer on the documentary film *Code of the Freaks* (2020). Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Somatechnics*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Crip Magazine*, *Feminist Wire*, the *Czech Sociological Review*, and *Lateral*.

[View all of Alyson Patsavas's articles.](#)

Article details

Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas, "With Grief and Joy — Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry, Part II," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.6>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Remote Access: A Crip Nightlife Party

by Aimi Hamraie and moira williams | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

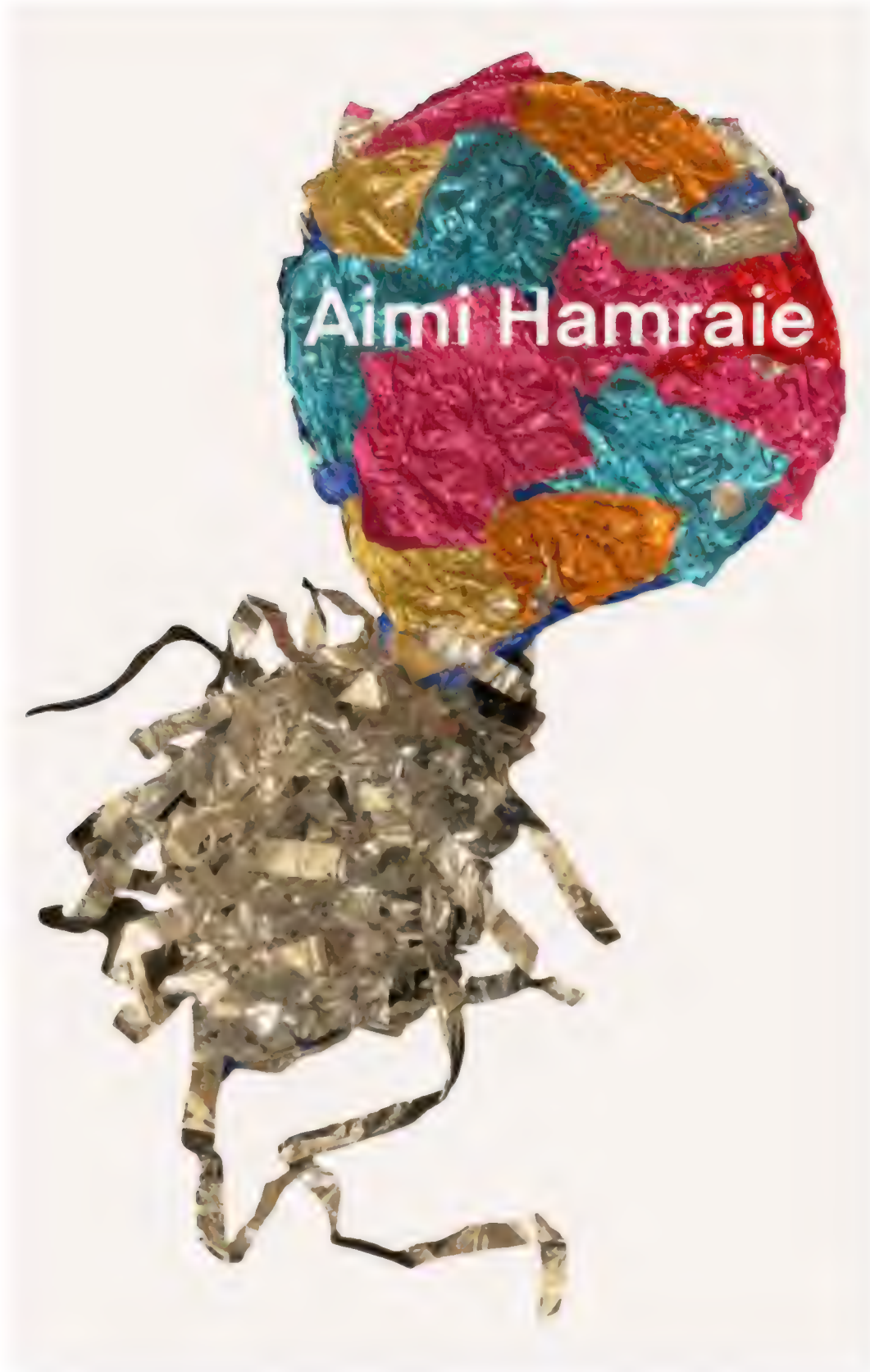
ABSTRACT Remote Access is a disability nightlife event informed by disability history, technology, and artistry. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a collective of disabled artists and designers created an event to showcase how disabled people often participate in social life from our homes and beds. This contribution offers a living archive of the party and its evolution, as the planners created protocols for collective access through methodologies such as participatory audio description and live description of musical sound. We discuss how each new event offered opportunities for designing new practices based on disabled knowledge and expertise. As a result, the series of Remote Access nightlife parties became an ongoing opportunity to develop iterative accessibility protocols and community standards for remote/digital participation.

KEYWORDS remote participation, disability, image description, culture, crip, hybridity, COVID-19, Zoom, access, collective access

REMOTE ACCESS:
a crip nightlife party
Remote Access Collective

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/1_Banner.jpeg >

Figure 1. Banner for Remote Access.



https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IMG_6691-1.gif

Figure 2. GIF of contributors. Text and curation by authors.

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/15coUGYAJv-RNzzYmP_K6kcCSNy1OUTRciwldbdDHvpA/edit?usp=sharing < <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/15coUGYAJv->

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States during March 2020, there was so much fear and confusion. But as disabled people, we knew that we had to carve out space to be together, even at a distance.¹ We already knew how to do this. We had done it many times. So we planned a party. It started like this . . .

March 12, 2020: a text exchange

Aimi: Hey Kevin! You've been on my mind.

How are you doing with all of this COVID stuff?

I'm also wondering if you know of anyone DJing crip parties online for folks to be together in this time (and whether this is something you think Critical Design Lab might want to organize)

Kevin: Thank you for checking in!

I would LOVE to organize a crip online party! Let's totally do this!

Aimi: Let's figure out a party time! I have Zoom pro through work and we can gather other resources together, too! <3

Kevin: I think i know how to send audio from my DJ controller to Zoom

Aimi: Awesome! Maybe we can pick a date and then find a few people to participate so you don't have to DJ the whole time

March 14, 2020

Kevin: Are you around today? I could start an email thread with some folks who would be wonderful digital access doulas

Aimi: Yeah, definitely. I can send a Zoom link.

Are you making the Google doc or should I?

Kevin: I'll start it up

Aimi: I made a page on the [Critical Design Lab] website < <https://www.mapping-access.com/remote-access>>

Kevin: Here is a participation guide: [Remote Access: a crip nightlife gathering < https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vluVI73ZZLgMNX6qvXgjgbZnIO7yYoQUioJpvJ8Jh-Q/edit#heading=h.z35jr6vpgf6>](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vluVI73ZZLgMNX6qvXgjgbZnIO7yYoQUioJpvJ8Jh-Q/edit#heading=h.z35jr6vpgf6)

I'm reaching out to a rad CART provider

Aimi: Maybe we can include some [#CripRitual < https://cripritual.com/>](https://cripritual.com/) s?

Kevin: woof love that

Now I'm thinking about how we could connect with mutual aid/fundraising efforts? Maybe in the participation guide?

Aimi: Yeah, that sounds great.

Kevin: okay so the audio is muuuuuch better when we use another streaming platform. Sounded great on twitter and instagram. But downside on all non-Zoom platforms is that it doesn't really feel like a gathering.

Aimi: great, how does captioning work on insta?

Kevin: if we're describing the DJ set only and people aren't coming on to say hi with their audio, i think we just go with the sound describers who will use the chat to put lyrics, aesthetics, etc. and an audio describer can come into the story periodically to describe things.

Aimi: Keep me posted! I gotta plan my outfit.

Kevin: Same! I need to stage the whole DJ booth and everything!



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/3_Party-announcement.jpg >

Figure 3. Remote Access party announcement



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/4_Aimi_s-screenshot-and-Tweet.jpg >

Figure 4. Remote Access Twitter screenshot.

"Remote Access: a crip nightlife event" is a disability nightlife party informed by Kevin Gotkin's [research on histories of crip nightlife](https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/30477) < <https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/30477> >, the Critical Design Lab < <https://www.mapping-access.com/> >'s [disability culture protocols](https://www.mapping-access.com/protocols) < <https://www.mapping-access.com/protocols> >, and the expertise of disabled artists, such as [moira williams](http://www.moirab670.com/) < <http://www.moirab670.com/> >, [Yo-Yo Lin](https://www.yoyolin.com/) < <https://www.yoyolin.com/> >, [Ezra Benus](https://www.ezrabenus.com/) < <https://www.ezrabenus.com/> >, and others. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a collective of disabled artists and designers (including Kevin Gotkin, Louise Hickman, and Aimi Hamraie) created an event to showcase how disabled people often participate in social life from our homes and beds. This event drew on knowledge and practices we already had: how to hire interpreters and CART providers, how to stream video, and how to find creative ways to meet online. We combined elements of collective access² through methodologies such as participatory audio description³ and live description of musical sound. Gotkin conceptualized "Access Doulas" as roles that would usher participants through the party's live DJ sets and disability arts showcases. As the broader collective (some of whose names appear in Figure 1) offered more parties, we also refined our protocols to build expansive methods of care and camaraderie. The events took on many iterations depending on the context, including Sunday afternoon gatherings, conference events, celebrations, digital worlds, and artist residencies. Each time, we incorporated new technological modes and tools. As a result, the series of Remote Access nightlife parties became an ongoing opportunity to develop iterative accessibility protocols and community

standards for remote/digital participation. Whether as party organizers or attendees, we left each party with feelings of joy, gratitude, connection, and desire for reconnection. We also found ourselves with more questions about how to further extend this critical aesthetic and cultural practice through a commitment to disability justice and disability culture.

March 22, 2020: post-party text exchange

Kevin: fully crying

THE BEAUTY

Like wow

Aimi: The best! Thank you soooo much!

Such love and community

We had up to 90 people at one point

March 28, 2020:

Kevin: hi! Babes are still living from the party last weekend. How would you feel about planning another one? And maybe developing a program of people to share work? I know people who are interested.

Aimi: yes yes yes!!!

I live for this

In this submission to “Crip Pandemic Life,” we offer a layered archive of the unfolding exchanges, ideas, events, conversations, and protocols that shaped the Remote Access nightlife party. There is a large concentration of disabled artists and cultural producers represented, as both organizers and participants have grown out of networks of collaborators. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are limitations to the archive that we present here.⁴ In future work on the project, including the Remote Access Archive <<https://www.mapping-access.com/the-remote-access-archive>>, we hope to gather impressions, documents, and other data from a broader range of organizers and participants.

Taking an approach that foregrounds available primary sources, we aim to present the reader with an immersive experience that includes text and images. Sometimes, an image or form of documentation will appear first (accompanied by an image description, per our protocols) before we explain it. As a reader, you are invited to engage linearly or move to different sections as your interests guide you.

We begin with a brief description of how the term “remote access” became meaningful for us and shaped the party as a form of ritual. We move into describing the evolution of different spaces in which we have held the party. Then, we focus in-depth on the methods of remote access, including the accessibility protocols developed for various iterations of the party. Finally, we discuss Remote Access as a reflection and practice of disability culture.

The Ritual of Remote Access

“Remote access” is a term that describes ways that disabled people create accessibility for ourselves and each other. We do this as part of a broad, collaborative disability culture, a culture that often takes shape at a distance. Remote access describes myriad media and methods of engagement. For example, it encompasses web streaming, live chats, sending letters or text messages, communicating through newsletters, and many other media, digital and analog. (The Critical Design Lab is exploring the history of this concept through the [Remote Access archive < https://www.mapping-access.com/the-remote-access-archive >](https://www.mapping-access.com/the-remote-access-archive)). Aimi Hamraie resonated with this term during the Occupy movement while doing disability justice organizing with Occupy Atlanta. One facet of this organizing was creating accessible livestreams of General Assemblies. Later, Hamraie brought these methods to organizing with the Nashville Disability Justice Collective. But all of us have engaged in forms of remote access, increasingly so in this digital age, and often in ways that are complicated and full of friction. We have asked for remote access to school, work, conferences, and art events, and have often been told that this form of accessibility is too expensive or complicated. Even before the pandemic, we stitched together our own forms of remote access in order to be together across long distances, to feel less alone. We know that remote participation is possible—technologically and financially—and that it is also imperfect, fraught, dependent on access to money and infrastructures that are not widely distributed. We have our limits in digital spaces and online time. Many of us still face barriers to usability in these spaces. Nevertheless, remote access is an essential tool for connection and collaboration. We felt the significance of remote access when we also encountered the pain of watching the world suddenly adopt some of these practices in 2020–2021 when non-disabled people needed them, only to take them away when vaccines became available in the United States.

Remote access is part of broader “crip technoscience” practices of remote connection (Hamraie 2017; Williamson 2012), through which disabled people share knowledge about hacking and tinkering across long distances in order to generate community, often through mutual aid.⁵ Specifically, by using a party as the basis of crip, Deaf, blind, chronically ill, and neurodivergent design iteration, we found generative opportunities to show the protocols that *already* exist in disability culture, as well as to create new ones that were inconceivable before the pandemic. We sought to document the protocols and practices of remote access in order to counteract the current refusal of distanced options (and the attendant forgetting that such options were widely used in the early pandemic years). In documenting remote access in this way, we hope to clarify its role in the tapestry of crip pandemic survival and thriving.

Remote access is a crip ritual < <https://cripritual.com/>>, repeated and re-iterated within disability culture. When we create opportunities for remote participation, play, and community, we not only create more inclusive spaces, but also often end up with unexpected practices or material forms. Since March 2020, each Remote Access party has been the site of emergent accessibility practices, which we will describe in more detail in the next section. Each party begins with a participation guide, the first of which was created by Gotkin and disabled scholar and artist Louise Hickman, with some help from Hamraie, in 2020.⁶ The participation guide provides a Zoom link, timetable of activities and presentations, accessibility information, links to relevant files (such as the participation cards discussed later), and other tools for taking part in the party.

Each time we host and produce one of these parties, we immediately find ourselves repeating rituals of access-making, rituals of disabled cultural production, and rituals of community expansion. In a July 2020 party called "Remote Access: Witches 'N' Glitches," held at the Allied Media Conference (AMC), we created an explicit ritual container for disability culture. For many conference attendees, the party was their first exposure to disability culture. This was despite the fact that one of several early sites for the articulation of disability justice concepts took place through Creating Collective Access < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/reflections-on-an-opening-disability-justice-and-creating-collective-access-in-detroit/>>, an intervention into the AMC space in 2010.⁷ Staging Remote Access within the AMC's first all-digital conference allowed us to hold a pocket of disability culture outside of the conference's normative time and space. We marked this space through an opening invocation by Hamraie, which has now become a feature of most of the parties:

We welcome you to the crip ritual of Remote Access, a way to celebrate and be together that emerges from crip culture. We'll start by creating a container for our party by imagining our spaces glowing with pink and purple light. Imagine your space as a bright dot on a map of the night sky. When we zoom out, your bright dot appears scattered across a landscape of other dots, with lines connecting them until multiple concentric circles of purple and pink light form. They shimmer. And within that shimmering, we charge up our circles with elements of crip power.

We call in the power of CRIP ACCESS: crip as refusing normalcy. Access as the flow of radical love and hospitality. Crip access as the element of facilitating belonging together for all of us and refusing to leave any of us behind. Crip access as flexible, ingenious, creative, and world-changing.

We call in the power of CRIP RAGE. Crip rage as non-compliance, the fire of crip protest, the smash of sledgehammer against sidewalk, of body against inaccessible building.

We call in the power of CRIP HUMOR. Crip humor is irreverent, taboo, biting, political. Crip humor as turning the gaze back onto Ableds. Crip humor as a cornerstone of crip ritual.

We call in the power of CRIP SLOWNESS. Crip slowness as valuable methodology and technology. Crip slowness as focusing away from ableist futures toward the pleasures and value of the present. Crip slowness as a way to move and a way to know.

We call in the power of CRIP PLEASURE. Crip pleasure as the joys emerging only from crip culture. Access intimacies, shared skills and stories, accessible potlucks, mutual aid networks, extended kinships, and access as love.

With this invocation, we asked participants to imagine reaching out to others on the Zoom screen, connecting across time and space as disabled people often have in our uses of remote access. We also invited play and stimming, alongside dancing.

In these and other rituals, we found that access-making is not merely translational; it is also playful. For example, to document and capture the energy of the Witches 'N' Glitches party, artist moira williams created collaged drawings of presenters (Figure 5), while other artists, such as Maya Suess, drew their own representation of moira's performance of a spell (Figure 6). These visual representations (and their descriptions) captured the energetic connections between participants and disabled artists showing their work. Transmitted across digital space, these analog forms of representation were emergent within the party space itself. That is, rather than being pre-planned forms of access, participants reached for them as improvisational tools that may or may not appear in future protocols.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/5_Visual-note-taking-from-Witches_N_Glitches.jpg >

Figure 5. Visual notetaking at the Witches 'n' Glitches party. Drawing by moira williams, 2020.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/6_Visual-note-taking-Drawing-of-moira_s-hands-during-ritual.jpg >

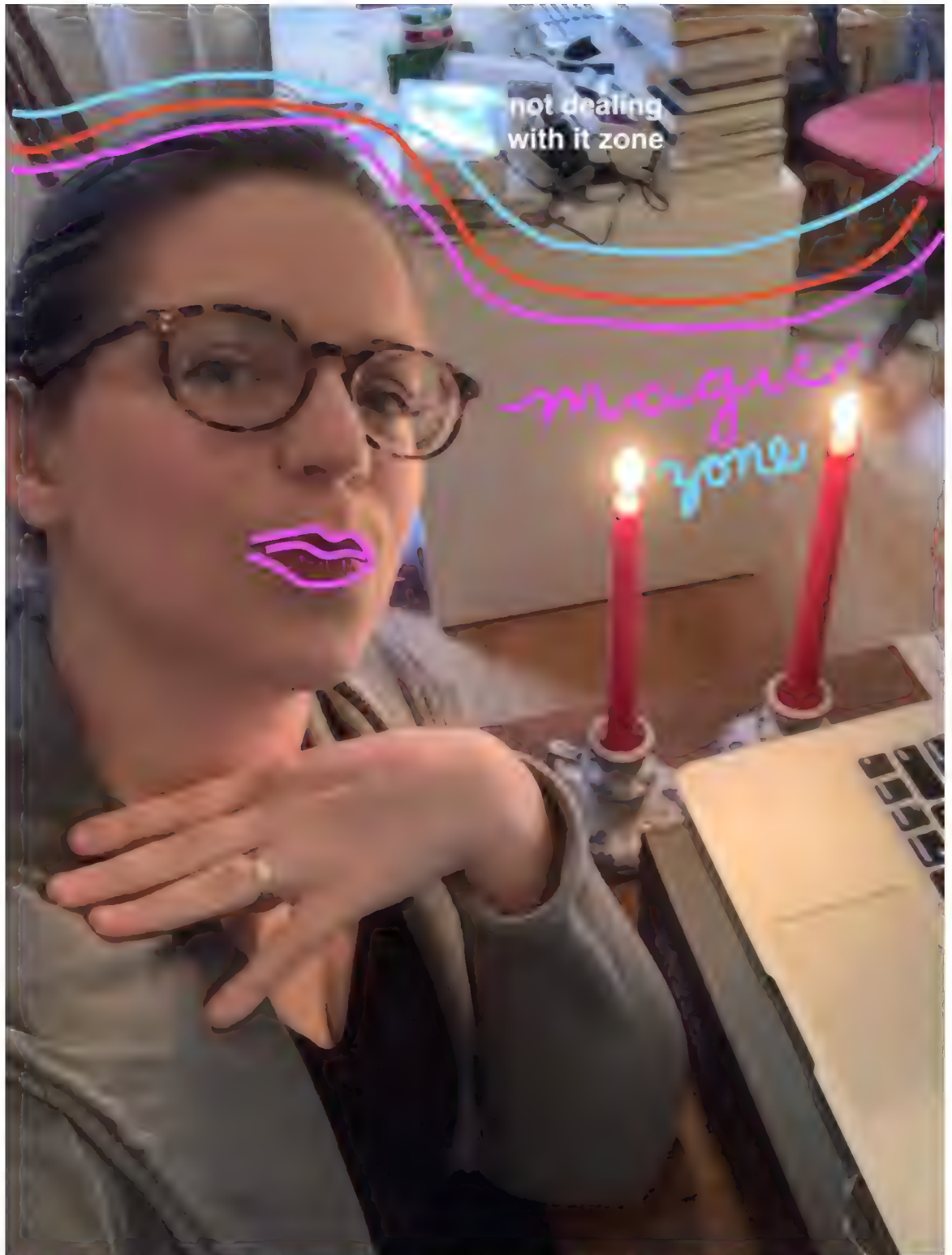
Figure 6. Visual note-taking of moira's hands.

Spaces of Remote Access

Over the last two years, Remote Access has been hosted in a number of digital spaces. In this section, we review how the evolution of the party reflected the constraints and opportunities that these spaces provided for developing accessibility protocols. In doing so, we hope to convey the open-ended, experimental sensibility of access-making that characterizes the project.

Initially, Kevin Gotkin (also known as DJ Who Girl) had practiced online DJing through livestreams on Twitter and Instagram. As they began imagining the Remote Access party, however, these platforms were inadequate for providing accessibility, let alone providing a feeling of being in a party space with other people. The party planners chose Zoom as an alternative platform because it allowed the layering of sound and images with their descriptions, participant chatting, and ways of seeing and being seen on the screen. While making this choice, we were aware of the inadequacies of this platform compared to alternatives such as Google Meet, which some participants and access doulas (particularly Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people) preferred for access to meeting settings. Both platforms underwent many updates, with new features added periodically as the pandemic unfolded. They each had varying degrees of reliability in terms of video speed and audio quality. Each of these platforms also had its own approach to showing captioning and allowing ASL interpreters to be “pinned” on the screen. New accessibility methods opened up within Zoom when organizers, who included both hearing and Deaf/HoH people, experimented with appropriating some of the new features for other (accessible) ends. For example, Gotkin and Hickman found that the new language translation channel (for providing audio translations of Spanish or French, for example) could be used for live audio descriptions, which participants could play over the music. Kevin also figured out how to connect his DJ tools to Zoom and override the platform’s tendency to even out bass notes or background noise.

As the party became more popular, we were asked to put on events for conferences, such as the Society for Disability Studies meeting (April 5, 2020 and April 20, 2021). At the in-person version of this conference, the “SDS dance” is an acclaimed site for disability nightlife, a fabled disability cultural space that often serves as the highlight of the academic disability studies year. Accounts of the SDS dance often offer it up as a material example of how disability culture, identity, and community take shape for participants, both those who identify as disabled and those who identify as non-disabled.⁸ In taking the SDS conference online due to the pandemic, the conference organizers worked with Remote Access to reproduce this experience in digital space. Participants and access doulas (such as Margaret Louise Fink, shown in Figure 7) approached the event as a festive occasion for connecting across long distances. The SDS Dance: Remote Access edition built on the in-person event’s celebration of disability choreography, commitment to fashion as expression, and celebratory music by bringing these into a virtual space where additional accessibility practices (including image and sound description, as well as the option to participate from home or bed) were available to participants. In these ways, Remote Access extended the forms of disability design experimentation that were already part of the SDS dance into the emergent remote disability spaces of the pandemic.⁹

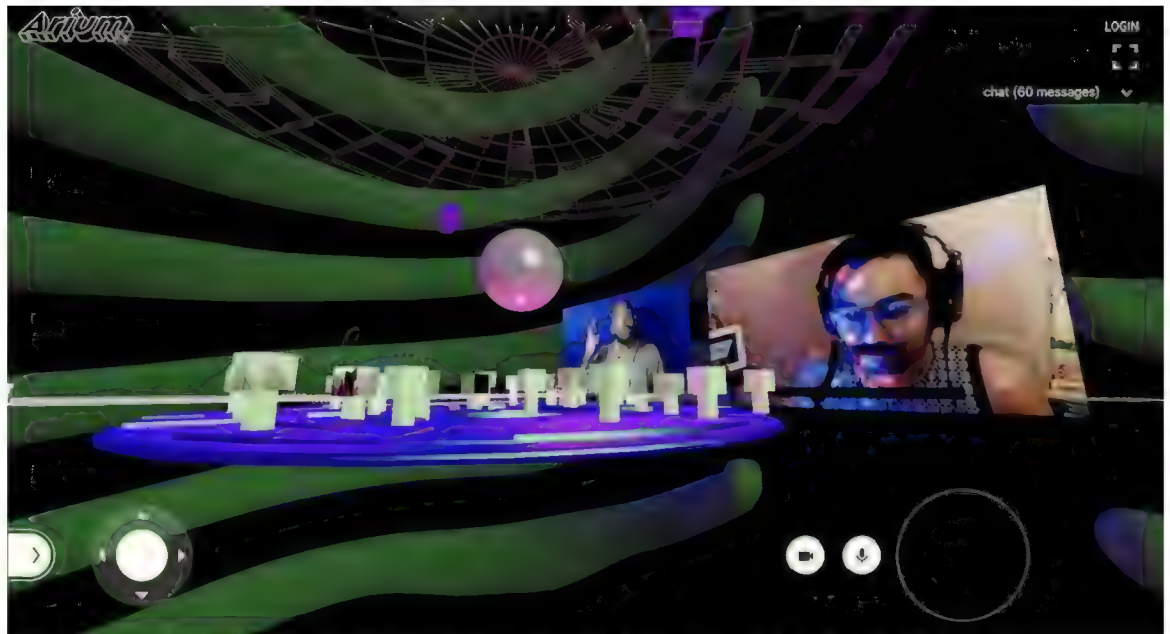


< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/7_Margaret-Fink-Access-Doula.jpeg >

Figure 7. A selfie of Margaret access doula-ing during a Remote Access party at the Society for Disability Studies 2020 Conference (April 5, 2020).

While Zoom remained a preferred platform for the Remote Access party, new technologies and the ingenuity of disabled artists built upon this platform to afford additional

experiences of sociality. Artist Yo-Yo Lin, working with Gotkin, designed the GlitchRealm <
<https://www.culturehub.org/re-fest-2021-events/remote-access-glitchrealm#:~:text=Remote%20Access%3A%20GlitchRealm%20is%20a,dancing%20in%20the%20lag%20together.>> using the three-dimensional digital platform Arium. Partygoers could participate either through Arium or through Zoom, and the Zoom screen (with ASL interpreter and live captioning) appeared within Arium on the “dance floor” (Figure 8). Partygoers in the GlitchRealm navigated the space with live avatars. They were greeted by access doulas as they moved through designated areas within the 3D space, such as the dance floor, karaoke room, and quiet space. These areas were all labeled and participants could reach them using keyboard keys. A unique feature of Arium that reproduced some elements of a party experience was that the sound volume would increase when an avatar moved closer in proximity to one of these spaces or to another avatar, giving the experience of being in a live space (Figure 9). Those of us preferring more intimate spaces could visit the karaoke room (facilitated by moira) (Figure 10) or the quiet/Spoonie space, where the music was not audible. Also inside the GlitchRealm were works of art by disabled artists, such as Finnegan Shannon’s blue benches asking participants to sit and rest (Figure 10).



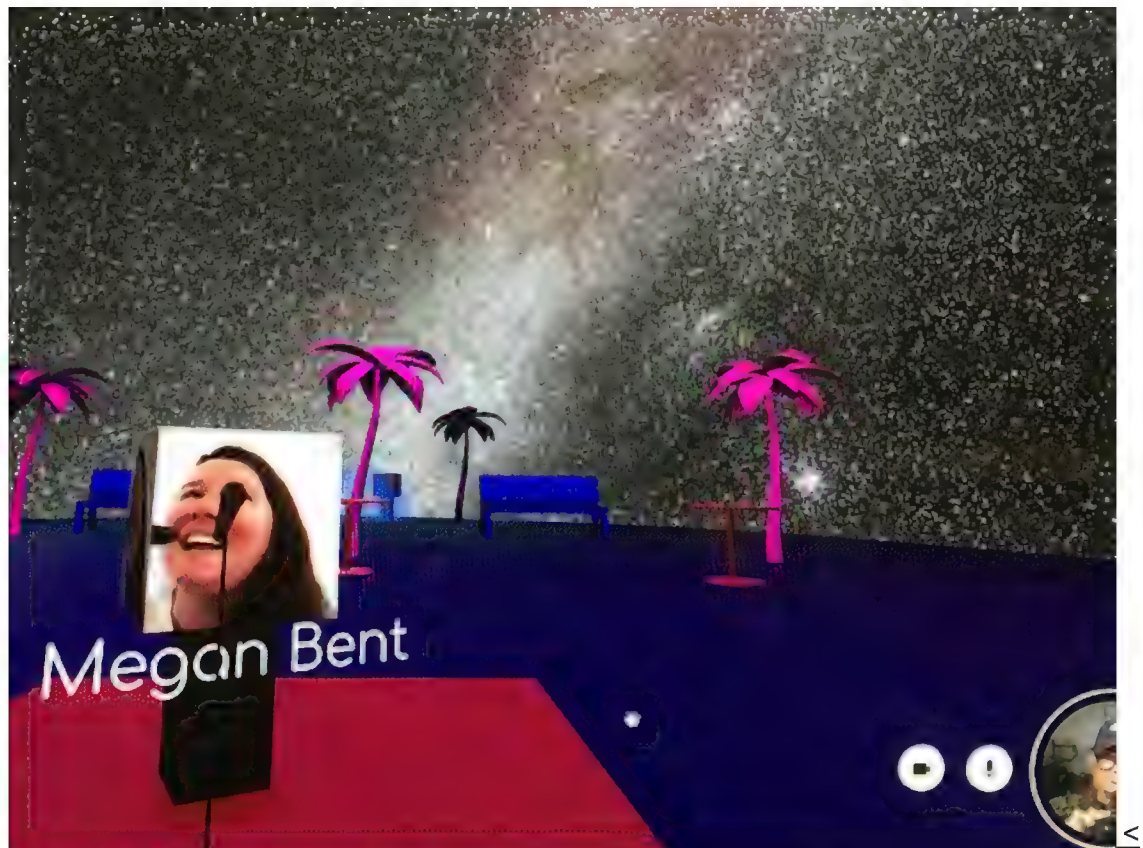
< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/8_Glitch_Realm.jpg >

Figure 8. The Glitch Realm party floor.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/9_Glitch_Realm.jpg >

Figure 9. Participants inside the Glitch Realm.



https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/10_Glitch_Realm_karaoke_AdobeExpress.gif

Figure 10. Glitch Realm karaoke.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/11_Practing-_the-_Social.jpg >

Figure 11. Practicing the Social party.

Another party was held in a virtual conference platform called Gathertown, which is a video game-like space (Figure 11). Unlike the GlitchRealm, Gathertown < <https://www.practicingthesocial.uoguelph.ca/gather-town-access/>> is a two-dimensional digital space. The avatars are self-fashioned using a menu of fashion and appearance choices. They navigate through the space using arrow keys and keyboard shortcuts allow them to appear to be dancing. In this version of the party, which celebrated the Practicing the Social Conference < <https://www.practicingthesocial.uoguelph.ca/>> at the University of Guelph (held online from January 20–22, 2022), the DJ and access providers appeared at the top of the screen, but the usual Zoom functions were not available. Access doulas provided image descriptions of the look and feel of Gathertown and helped participants navigate the space.

On July 11, 2021 another iteration of Remote Access took place within a hybrid container, with both remote virtual and in-person options for participation. The Remote Access Disability Cabaret and Dance Party (or “barge party”) was held on an accessible barge in New York City. Participants and organizers gathered at The Waterfront Museum < <https://waterfrontmuseum.org/>> in Brooklyn, New York to celebrate extended comment deadlines for New York City’s cross-disabled communities concerning the local Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. Specifically, partygoers were celebrating the addition of a nearby accessible public bathroom, along with an accessible barge (which served as a party boat) (Figure 12). This party in early July 2021 coincided with New York City’s reopenings after periods of pandemic lockdown. Designing a hybrid party was more complex than simply following the protocols for a remote party in physical space, however. Even more complicated was a hybrid party centering cross-disability access and culture. Organizers were concerned about addressing partygoers’ anxieties about being in-person again. The task was to cocreate abundant and flexible access that could afford participants a cohesive social experience.

The barge party took water as its theme. This theme built on the celebration of accessibility on New York City’s waterfront by also imagining “water intimacy,” an extension of Mia Mingus’s concept of “access intimacy.”¹⁰ moira williams had developed ongoing water intimacies as a focus of their work through the Works on Water < <https://www.worksonwater.org/members/moira-williams>> exhibition and arts organization Culture Push < <http://culturepush.org>> ’s Tending the Edge < <https://www.culturepush.org/tending-the-edge-2021>> . These existing collaborations around the theme of water enabled the party’s celebration of accessible waterways to tap into a network of interested celebrants. The party was rich with people willing to collectively support access, and to experiment with different options for access and socializing across time, space and technology.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/12_barge_interior_1.jpg >

Figure 12. Barge party interior. Photo courtesy of Walter Wlodarczyk.

The Waterfront Barge Museum's expansive size, multiple large open doors, secluded inlet with a large dock and bench-filled park were ideal in that the space architecturally supported both COVID-19 and accessibility protocols. In total, there were four performances (two in-person and two remote), as well as one video screening. For example, presenter BI3ssing Oshun Ra joined via Zoom (Figure 14). Each performance was projected into Zoom and was displayed on a large screen in the barge space. Access doulas helped both remote and in-person participants navigate the party. In-person access doulas identified themselves by wearing orange ("access") sashes covered in black and white checked pins with colorful feathers (Figure 13), whereas online access doulas used a black and white access doula virtual background (right lower corner in Figure 15).

The in-person experience offered multiple access points. Eight access points spread across the barge and dock. Several were small cozy areas with an access doula in attendance. Another was a larger, texture-filled, and cozy, chill crip fringe stim joy space offering pillows and swimming pool inflatables for comfort and multiple ways for sitting, stretching out, or curling up. Two access doulas also wandered and mingled throughout the party. One access doula facilitated engagement between in-person and remote partygoers via a large screen, a camera, and laptop. Each provided audio description, basic barge information and [Participation Guides](#) <

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YIlfKaJRQsGcVrjmjCUYro-T9GcC2w9V3NSfHyPIEps/edit> > . Participation Guides included accessible directions, an

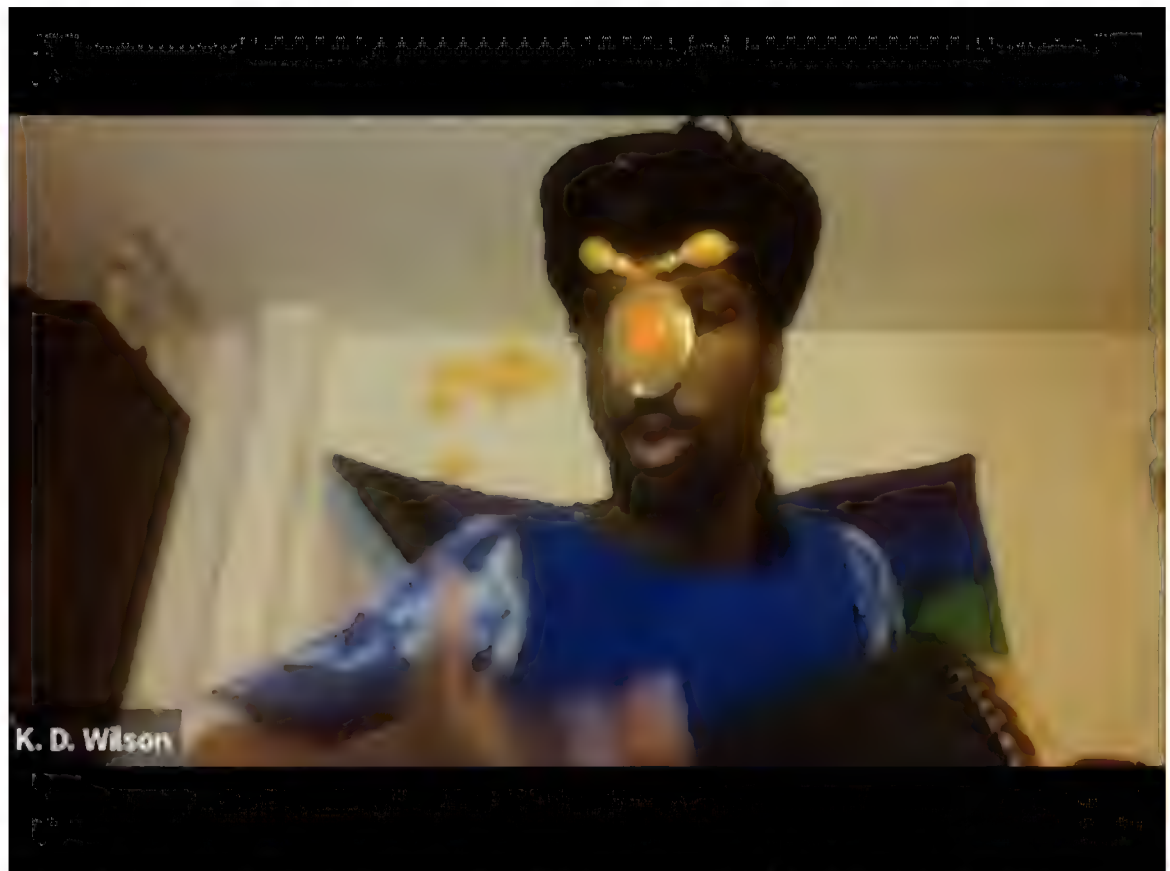
onboard access points map, non-alcoholic drink recipes, and ideas for stim fringe joy. The

guides also helped participants understand how to interact between platforms, connect with online attendees via Zoom on their phone, and sign up for access doula duties.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/13_Clarinda_access_doula_cross_plaform-faciliator.jpg >

Figure 13. Barge party Access Doula. Photo courtesy of Walter Wlodarczyk. Additional barge party photos < <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/107Elkd4322ojC8A8hxfuBCZfXssEDol4> > are available.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/14_Barge-party-performance-Blessing.jpg>

Figure 14. Hybrid performance at Barge party. A transcript of Bl3ssing's performance < <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13kw5AxxYobJgFx1eY4zkewGkinRXeKMi/view>> is available.

Remote partygoers experienced forms of access available in previous remote parties, as well as new experiences of access, including interacting across platforms. These experiences included direct conversations with DJ WhoGirl (Kevin Gotkin), moira williams, and Clarinda Mac Low, the access doula who coordinated engagement across platforms. Access doulas greeted and chatted with participants on Zoom and shared information about the barge and the surrounding neighborhood. At one point, sound qualities were disrupted between the remote and in-person party during a video screening. Because of the parties direct interactions between online and in-person partygoers along with the access and communication support provided by the online access doulas, moira and Clarinda acknowledged and corrected the sound glitch immediately. The video resumed with moira reading the transcript aloud for both in-person and online partygoers, relieving any kind of tension between formats and partygoers experiences. The immediate and momentary stop to negotiate access for and with the online partygoers ultimately added to everybody's experience as being part of the party and supported (see "Chat excerpt < <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Hz0DC6EFEQfJ8bcJKKIEQIDZPYtH3szAXCXOC1e1UBI/edit>> "). Maya Shah and Alberto Jiménez served as roaming live-streamers wandering

throughout the party and performances with an iPad describing what was going on and activated connections between remote and in-person partygoers. Shah's and Jiménez's descriptions addressed the weather, sounds, and smells along the waterfront for remote partygoers. In-person partygoers used their own devices to contribute to these descriptions as well.

Whether completely remote or hybrid, Remote Access participants experienced accessibility as a commitment, an attitude, a flexible and adaptable set of practices, and as a way of designating spaces for disability culture outside of normative space and time. As a result, organizers found that opportunities emerged for cross-disability solidarity, emergent practices, and abundance. In the next section, we explore the methods and protocols of Remote Access in greater depth.

The Methods of Remote Access

The Remote Access party is a media production that has developed through many iterations and accordingly represents an evolving array of accessibility practices. Participants and access doulas enact some of these practices within the party itself, while organizers prepare some of them behind the scenes. Each party begins with a participation guide, which outlines the accessibility information, policies, and procedures. The guide also calls for volunteer "access doulas" who will help participants navigate the space. These [participation guides](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vluVI73ZZLgMNX6qvXgjgbZnlO7yYoQUioJpvJ8Jh-Q/edit#heading=h.z35jr6vpqfi6) < <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vluVI73ZZLgMNX6qvXgjgbZnlO7yYoQUioJpvJ8Jh-Q/edit#heading=h.z35jr6vpqfi6>> developed < https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Dog-R6FvbzSSdhy49LBqesqXNWDHnC9w1k-_i6peieg/edit> progressively < <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Rm5ZJYDa81wMn0bPcsRI4uyhoEdcZZTsVjkKsL8L8Po/edit>>, with additional protocols and procedures added before new parties. Remote Access protocols integrate standard and predictable forms of access with emergent practices. From the beginning, every Remote Access party has included American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, live captioning, and image descriptions. In addition to these better-known elements of access, the parties have also developed a number of other methods of access-making. Below, we outline the central roles and elements that we found most important in defining our party protocol.

Access Doulas

Although the parties emerged from Gotkin's DJ practice and Critical Design Lab protocols, party organization quickly became a collective endeavor of "Access Doulas," disabled and non-disabled people who took on the work of facilitating access in real time. The concept

of doula-ing names access as a type of care that needs attending-to, a commitment to access-making through a temporal duration, and a type of labor that can be practiced and cultivated. Kevin thought of the term “access doula” in early party-planning as an extension of other doula practices, including birth, death, and [HIV doulas < http://hivdoula.work/>](http://hivdoula.work/) . Within the party, access doulas take on roles such as helping with audio and sound description, guiding participants in the space, answering questions, and offering technical and emotional support.

The access doula model is based on mutual aid principles related to “collective access.” ¹¹ For example, while organizers may aspire to encourage participatory forms of access-making, we also recognize that there are differences in the quality of access afforded by professionalized disability access providers (such as CART and ASL providers, and between Deaf and non-Deaf ASL interpreters) as compared to participants who may want to transcribe text in the chat or who may want to contribute ASL but are not fluent signers. There are also differences between practices (including CART and ASL) that have established norms of practice and those that are more emergent, including artistic approaches to sound description or participatory image description. In addition, the parties serve as a space for aestheticizing various forms of access (such as in Figures 5 and 6).

Thus, in attending to access as a form of labor, we wanted to define the concepts of “access” and “labor” as broadly as possible. At the same time, we faced a paradox. As a priority, we wanted to ensure fair compensation for this labor. This priority came up against the party’s commitment to do-it-yourself (DIY) forms of access, which we had originally adopted as a gesture of disability resourcefulness when we had limited access to money or technical resources. In terms of DIY access, we wanted access labor within the party space to be a seedbed for collective access, something that participants could take with them into other spaces or future parties. In addition to all of these commitments to more equitable access labor, we sought to redefine the labor of participation, particularly in a very Zoom-saturated time, by incorporating neurodivergent protocols for signaling capacity for participation (such as through participation cards that moira developed, explained further below).

As organizers, we have taken the opportunity to understand access labor as a seedbed for organizing toward more skilled access doula-ing practices. For example, when participants sign up for access doula roles, they are also invited to continue to participate as party organizers. As a result, Remote Access has developed a party structure that retains the institutional and technical memory of emergent access practices, but is ultimately non-hierarchical and horizontal in terms of distributions of power. Organizers make arrangements behind the scenes, while participants both receive and produce expansive disability culture-informed forms of access. Together, they participate in collective and

embodied responses to music, art, and sociality. As organizers, we have watched transformative processes emerge as party attendees co-witness and co-participate in processes that we understand as crip technoscience, participatory cultural abundance, crip celebratory resistance, and public political agency. In the coming sections, we focus on two emergent practices—sound description and participation cards—that are still developing within the Remote Access space.

Sound Description

Because Remote Access is a dance party with live DJ sets, sound description has emerged as an important method for conveying music in multiple accessible formats. Descriptions of sound include lyrics, the sonic qualities of singing, beat and rhythm, and mood. During the parties, sound descriptions are often offered in the chat, as well as in a separate document. Creating sound descriptions requires pre-planning and coordination amongst artists, access doulas, and access providers. For example, Kevin Gotkin (DJ WhoGirl) produces [descriptions < https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12d7nTzXyWm8D4bJtUQL9bpFaug-FOtEw>](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12d7nTzXyWm8D4bJtUQL9bpFaug-FOtEw) along with their DJ set, in cocreation with other access doulas, before the party. These descriptions are shared ahead of time with the ASL interpreter and CART provider to help them prepare. During the party, the sound descriptions are entered into the Zoom chat, in addition to being made available via Google Doc to participants. The table below shows an example:

DJ SET #1				
CLOCK TIME (ET)	FILE TIME	TRACK	LYRICS	DESCRIPTION
8:00	00:00	"4T Recordings" by Four Tet x "A Spell for the Present Moment" by Beverly Glenn Copeland	<p>Open the way inside you The universe is your only breath Surrender to the present moment What's coming now is all that's left Many rivers flow through us Many creatures become us Many storms change the journey The dirt keeps calling us home</p> <p>Open the way inside you The universe is your only breath Surrender to the present moment What's coming now is all that's left Seed the soil within you You drumbeat You shimmering leaf Listen for the sound of sunlight Live a life that's worth your grief</p> <p>Open the way inside you The universe is your only breath Surrender to the present moment What's coming now is all that's left</p>	<p>There's a song and a spell. Mid-bass tones stretch, no beat just yet. There's a voice that cuts through, sounds like a child's voice maybe. Then Beverly Glenn-Copeland's spell. The vocals in the background are like a dawn. The aesthetic is contemplative, soft, gentle. This is not what the club is usually like! This is more meditative. Birdsong. More echoing vocal riffs. Staccato notes that warp and climb, out of tune but in a playful way.</p>

Table 1. An example of sound description for DJ Who Girl's "Lyrics Crate," noting the time, file time, track title, lyrics, and sound description.

The Remote Access protocol around sound description is also emergent, taking on qualities similar to Bojana Coklyat and Finnegan Shannon's Alt-Text as Poetry < <https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/>> method. In Coklyat and Finnegan's approach to image description, visual media are not simply straight-forward or objective phenomena. Instead, the ways that a describer understands an image based on their own positionality shapes the aesthetics of the description. This also means that describers can play with the aesthetics of image description, effectively writing poetry. Beyond objective descriptions of sound, Remote Access organizers have taken a poetic approach to sound description. For example, access doula and digital media scholar Charles Eppley has developed methods of sound description based on their work as a professional sound describer < <https://www.charleseppley.com/services>> . Party organizer and participant Margaret Fink provided this assessment of the sound descriptions:

I'm deaf and/but I am also a sound user who enjoys music, even if my experience might not be the same as a hearing person. The sound descriptions Charles offered were so cool. I remember being drawn to them with relish and curiosity, because they both mapped onto and gave some additional detail/specificity to what I was hearing. I love that [they] attended to the vibe of the music, and I also super appreciated the way [their] very finely-calibrated genre and sound descriptors offered some of the ambiance of the music that might come from cultural context. So I liked knowing that something was an avant-funk cover of a Lady Gaga song, or if the percussion sounded tinny or like it scattered and disappeared. These are all made up memories but capture some of the delight of the sound descriptions.

In other words, sound descriptions integrate both technical and sensory elements to convey the mood, tempo, and feel of the music. Access doula Teresa Suh layers on additional description based on experience with sound description. For instance, at one Remote Access event held as the session "Choosing Ourselves and Each Other: Queer Disabled Legacies, Desires, and Dreams < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfBUeTxJZSE>> " of the Disability Futures Symposium (July 19, 2021), Eppley and Suh each described Phantazn's "Sweet Sweet Abyss (Vocal Dub) < <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nccxlQzqu5hbXq851c0igPGpX2avduj5/view?usp=sharing>> ." The descriptions read as follows:

charles: Skeletal yet bouncy syncopated rhythm with murky kick drum, tinny high-hats and soft synth pads; tempo about 130 bpm. Slurred lyrics “let me take you on a journey” contrast the sharp beat, which is lifted up by a glitchy, stretched-out vocal sample acting as a crescendo to a beat drop. Stabbing short synths and syncopated handclaps, punctuated by choppy vocal samples, give this an electro funk feeling. Throughout the song, the beat repeatedly falls away as an ethereal androgynous voice murmurs below, before picking back up to a groove, complemented now by a ravey breakbeat sample. This makes me feel like I’ve had a couple of Red Bulls that haven’t really kicked in yet.

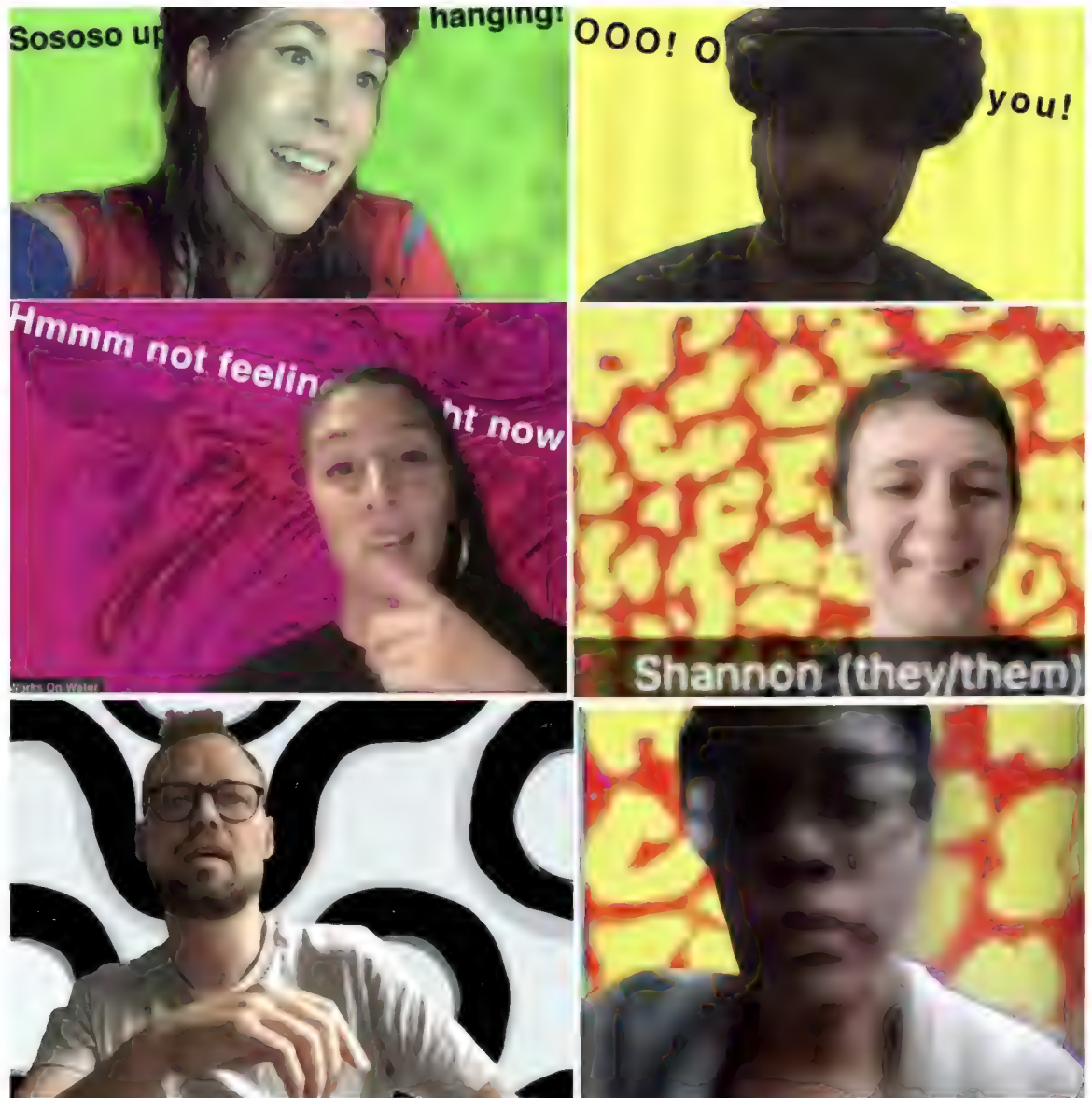
Teresa: A muddy kick and tinny high-hats create a syncopated, strutting rhythm. Overlays of synths softly swell in the background as a voice begins to speak about “a journey” in an ethereal tone. The sound of a sustained harmonic cry emerges out of the ethereal tones, crescendoing into a beat drop. A repetition of short rhythmic synths form a breakbeat. A voice maintains the rhythm of the synths but adds an echo that creates the sense of temporal disorientation. The voice is fragmented into multiple voices. Sounds like we are making our way in hyperspeed in space watching ourselves get split into multiple dimensions, transcending into a space that is not material.

When offered in the chat to participants, the combination of the two descriptions exemplifies collective or participatory audio description method, similar to the image description methods offered by Kleege and Wallin and Coklyat and Finnegan.¹² Participatory description involves iterative (and multi-person) descriptions that layer upon one another. In extending principles of image description to sound, access doulas are revealing potentially cross-disability methods of exchange and meaning-making. Across these methods, the labor of producing access is distributed amongst collectives while the objectivity of singular descriptions is not taken for granted as an objective representation of the media described. Instead, description emerges as a tapestry or cacophony of representations. In the case of describing a DJ set, where music and sounds are also layered in complex ways, participatory descriptions by access doulas and party participants mirror the form of the mixed audio content, as well.

Because DJ sets are pre-designed, they lend themselves well to pre-description by access doulas. By contrast, williams facilitated karaoke sessions enabling partygoers to learn and practice description in real time. Each karaoke session focused on two or three songs. Access was not already built into these sessions. Instead, the short and spontaneous karaoke sessions were intentionally crafted to invite cross-disability participation in visual and audio description. Participants described these elements both in the chat and aloud (which was then captioned). The karaoke sessions thus became a playful distribution of labor amongst participants, whereas the access-rich DJ sets were pre-scripted in their descriptions. We watched as access was spontaneously cocreated, an emergent strategy shared between party participants.¹³ In these unscripted karaoke spaces, experimental access took shape by co-witnessing one another’s access needs, in addition to

recognizing our own access needs. Thus, partygoers were offered the opportunity to shift from attendee to active access-maker and provider.

Participation Cards



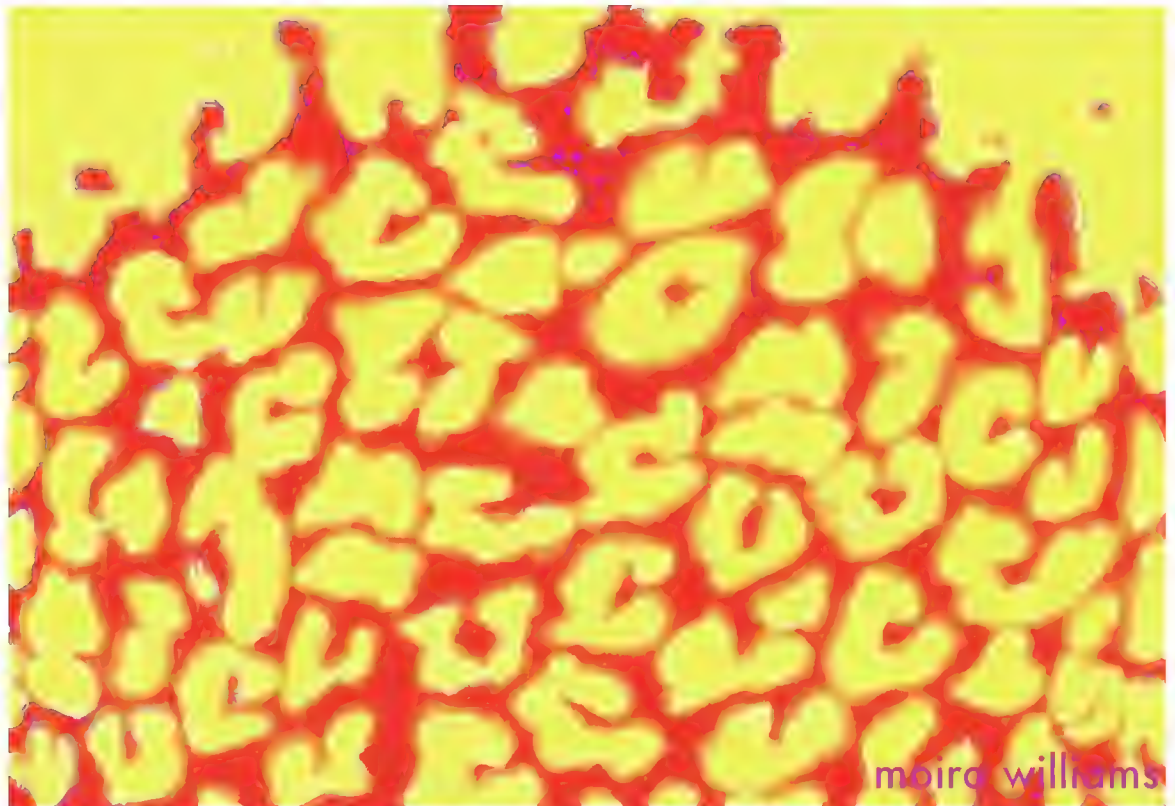
< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/15_Participation-cards-collage.jpg >

Figure 15. Participation cards collage.

When people attend parties, they may have different levels of desire for interaction with other people. Some people may want a lot of interaction, while others may want none or may only want to interact with people under certain conditions. In neurodivergent spaces, participation cards are actual cards that are worn like buttons or badges. They are a tool that has been developed to communicate differences in desire for social participation.

Building on the tradition of participation cards developed by neurodivergent people in social spaces, moira created Remote Access Participation Cards (Figure 15) as virtual backgrounds that participants could download for parties and/or use elsewhere. Each card offers participants a way to express their level of desired social interaction directly and with ease. Our three Participation Cards are green ("Sososo up for chatting and hanging!"), yellow ("OOO only if I know you!") and red ("Hmmm not feeling it right now"). The level of social interaction a partygoer is up for is explained by the black text across the top of the card along with the color of the card. Image descriptions with a brief how-to are located on a readable Google Doc in a folder with the downloadable [cards < https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-bqAllceVDpYGUucjDS9guzMiigFda9i>](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-bqAllceVDpYGUucjDS9guzMiigFda9i) . The Participation Card folder < <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-bqAllceVDpYGUucjDS9guzMiigFda9i>> is hyperlinked in all our Participation Guides following the Witches 'N' Glitches party. Access Doulas are also identifiable by a black, gray, and white Access Doula Card, which is also designed for color blindness. The Access Doula card reminds participants that added support is available. This includes access doulas who, from time to time, need support from other access doulas with negotiating access, as well.

Remote Access Participation Cards invite multiple opportunities for shifting crip social desires and emotions. Partygoers can swap out Participation Cards according to how much or little interaction they desire. A brightly colored abstract leopard print "Just for fun! Make it your own!" card, invites participants to make their own participation card and use it as they like (Figure 16). Participants describe their background images/cards during the party along with providing visual descriptions of themselves.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/16_Participation_Card_Just_For_Fun.jpg>

Figure 16. Participation card close-up. Additional participation cards < <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-bqAllceVDpYGUUcjDS9guzMiigFda9i>> are available.

Participation cards build on neurodivergent access methods to recognize the need for expressing and receiving information about emotional and/or physical access needs in shared spaces. These cards allow participants to be together without neurotypical demands for interaction becoming party norms. Although they are visual elements, their interaction with other accessibility protocols (including written and audio description) makes them into potent tools for cross-disability solidarity.

For williams, who created the participation cards, these tools bear resemblances to the practice of land acknowledgement. Participation cards recognize that the virtual landscapes through which remote access takes place are contested, just as the physical spaces and lands we work within daily are contested. As williams (who is Indigenous) writes in their Territorial Land Acknowledgement < <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YejoMRvDagKDoXtcyCdGJ652JdGbSUVpg1s9T38lphk/edit>>, both virtual and physical spaces are built on continued legacies of slavery and settler colonialism.¹⁴ While participation cards and Land Acknowledgements themselves do not change these legacies, they are emergent practices that add considerations of consent and negotiation to how party participants interact within the space and one another. Collectively acknowledging the histories of the lands, the support systems that sustain us,

and the ways we have come to them is to commit to the on-going process of turning ourselves towards cross-disability and across justice solidarity—this is not something we set at the beginning of an event and move on from. Rather, it is the way we emerge and cocreate across justices together.

Remote Access and Disability Culture

Remote Access invited collaborations across disability experiences, culminating in a cross-disability cultural space. These spaces continue to be significant as the pandemic rages on and opportunities for remote participation are nevertheless taken away. To better understand the significance of spaces for remote access (particularly for immunocompromised people), we invited collaborator Megan Bent to record some reflections on Remote Access. These reflections were recorded on February 2, 2022 and are transcribed below.

I participated in my first Remote Access nightlife event at the Witches'N'Glitches party in the summer of 2020. I was invited by a then- acquaintance and now dear friend, moira williams. Being immunocompromised, I had been at home since March (and still remain at home now almost two years later). As many in the pandemic I had been on numerous Zooms as means of connection but this event, Witches'N' Glitches, went somewhere else, somewhere deeper, more joyful, and more connective than any online event I had been to. It was centered in crip magic and I felt the invitation to be there as myself as I needed to be, which was new and radical for me. Since then, it has been Remote Access events that have fed and nourished my soul through this pandemic. It has been meaningful to grow closer to my crip community and to experience access intimacy for the first time in my life. To move from being an attendee to access doula and helping to plan and coordinate remote access events (crip karaoke!!!) in the future. It has been disappointing to watch online events and accessible options disappear in the summer of 2021 as calls for a return to "normalcy" grow louder (which, I have a lot of thoughts on that word for another time). But that has just increased my resolve to work to continue creating remotely accessible joy and access intimacy for our crip community. I am truly grateful for those who led the way like moira and Kevin, and not only for the joy and community it's brought to my life, but also the ways in which it has radically changed my own understanding of access needs and how creating access is a pivotal part of equity, inclusion, safety, leadership, and creativity.

– Megan Bent

The emphasis on disability culture and joy pervades the way that participants comment on Remote Access in private conversations with organizers. Until this point, we have not made a systematic attempt to gather feedback from party participants. In the context of a party, however, distributing a survey could create social or access barriers, distracting from the celebration itself. A more organized planning collective is emerging to address these issues and to solicit feedback about how accessibility measures are working for participants.

Since 2020, the organizers have developed Remote Access as a series of party spaces, gathering opportunities, and access protocols for creating disability cultural spaces that are available across long distances. We have endeavored to make space for emerging practices that address our access needs as we come to understand them in their complexity and change. We have made disability culture the central reference for our methods. Our primary goal has been to invite cocreation in collective access-making. As the party continues to develop through further iterations, our focus on disability and crip community remains central, while we continually seek to expand the boundaries and technologies shaping how we enact joy and pleasure within our communities.

Notes

1. The authors identify as disabled and as part of disability culture. Williams is an Indigenous, queer, and multiple disabled person. Hamraie is disabled, neurodivergent, trans, and SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African). ↵
2. Mia Mingus, "Reflections from Detroit: Reflections On An Opening: Disability Justice and Creating Collective Access in Detroit," INCITE Blog, August 23, 2010, <http://inciteblog.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/reflectionsfrom-detroit-reflections-on-an-opening-disability-justice-and-creatingcollective-access-in-detroit/> <<http://inciteblog.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/reflectionsfrom-detroit-reflections-on-an-opening-disability-justice-and-creatingcollective-access-in-detroit/>>; Aimi Hamraie, "Designing Collective Access: a feminist disability theory of Universal Design," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2013). ↵
3. Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin, "Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2015). ↵
4. As this was not a research project with formal surveying and data collection, our archive emerges from material traces and process documents, such as images, text messages and voice memos, transcripts of sound and image descriptions, and other unintentional documentation left behind with each iteration of the party. The organizing team for Remote Access has had a fluid, expansive, and decentralized quality, often blurring the lines between organizer and participant as partygoers are invited into the organizing process during and after each event. The team has included a wide range of disabled people, some of whom identify politically with disability and some who do not. This range includes neurodivergent, physically disabled, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and chronically ill people, including multiply-marginalized (queer, BIPOC, and working class) people. In this paper, we do not identify individual peoples' relationships to disability other than our own due to privacy concerns raised by multiply-marginalized disabled participants, who are uniquely at risk of racialized profiling, losing benefits, and medical bias if their identification with disability is made public. ↵
5. Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Bess Williamson, "Electric Moms and Quad Drivers: People

- with Disabilities Buying, Making, and Using Technology in Postwar America," *American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2012): 5–29. ↵
6. Kevin Gotkin, Louise Hickman, Aimi Hamraie, with the Critical Design Lab, "Remote Access: Crip Nightlife Participation Guide," March 2020, bit.ly/RemoteAccessPartyGuide. ↵
 7. The concept of disability justice has been further articulated beyond Creating Collective Access. For example, the performance art collective Sins Invalid, co-led by Patty Berne, wrote the "Ten Principles of Disability Justice." Patricia Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, David Langstaff, and Sins Invalid, "Ten Principles of Disability Justice," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2018): 227–230. ↵
 8. Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1998). Kevin Gotkin, "Crip Club Vibes," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1–7; Sami Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013). ↵
 9. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017). ↵
 10. Mingus, "Reflections from Detroit." ↵
 11. Hamraie, "Designing Collective Access"; Mingus, "Reflections from Detroit." But in this sense, it also raises important questions of "access labor" for us.[12. Louise Hickman, "Transcription Work and the Practices of Crip Technoscience," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1–10. ↵
 12. Kleege and Wallin, "Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool"; Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan, *Alt-Text as Poetry* workbook, 2020, <https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/> ↵
 13. brown, *Emergent Strategy*. ↵
 14. moira williams, Territorial Land Acknowledgement, Google Doc, 2019, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YejoMRvDagKDoXtcyCdGJ652JdGbSUVpg1s9T38lphk/edit>. ↵
-

Author Information



Aimi Hamraie

Aimi Hamraie is Associate Professor of Medicine, Health, & Society and American Studies at Vanderbilt University and director of the Critical Design Lab. Hamraie is author of *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and host of the *Contra** podcast on disability and design. They are a member of the United States Access Board and a 2022 United States Artists Fellow. With Cassandra Hartblay and Jarah Moesch, Hamraie co-curated #CripRitual, a multi-site exhibition of twenty-five disabled artists at the Tangled Arts and Disability and Doris McCarthy Galleries in Toronto. With Kelly Fritsch, Mara Mills, and David Serlin, Hamraie co-edited a special issue of *Catalyst: feminism theory technoscience* on "crip technoscience." Hamraie's interdisciplinary academic research focuses on accessibility and built environments. Trained as a feminist disability scholar,

they contribute to the fields of critical disability studies, science and technology studies, critical design and urbanism, critical race theory, and the environmental humanities. Hamraie's research is funded by the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the Smithsonian Institution, the Mellon Foundation, the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Arts, and the National Humanities Alliance.

[View all of Aimi Hamraie's articles.](#)



moira williams

moira williams is a disabled Indigenous artist, cross-disability cultural activist, and access doula, cocreating and weaving disability justice together with crip celebratory resistance and environmental justice. moira believes in access as art and "access intimacy" as an attitude needed to push beyond the limitations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. moira's work with water focuses on access intimacy and water intimacy as ways forward to accessible waterfronts. In 2021, as part of Works On Water's Tending the Edge, moira engaged New York City's disability communities along with the NYC Department of City Planning and the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan. As part of this, moira created an online and in-person Disability Cabaret on an accessible boat. moira received a Santa Fe Arts Institute REVOLUTION, Blue Mountain Center Harriet Barlow Residency, Disability + DANCE NYC Social Justice Fellowships, a U.S. Artists Disability Futures Fund, and Laundromat Project Abundance grants. Their co-creative work has been at Tangled Art + Disability, Canada, CUE Art Foundation, Common Field, i-Park Biennial, Landscape Research, UK, ARos Museum, Denmark, and MoMA PS1. moira co-curated TALK BACK at Flux Factory with Lexy Ho-Tai, the first NYC exhibition and three-day convening to center intersectional, intergenerational, cross-disability artists and activists, and which was cited in *The New York Times*.

[View all of moira williams's articles.](#)

Article details

Aimi Hamraie and moira williams, "Remote Access: A Crip Nightlife Party," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.7>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

Corona Look of the Day: Social Media Posts About Disabled Beauty and Resistance in the Time of COVID-19

by Sara Palmer and Bethany Stevens | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT The authors created a photo and essay series entitled "Corona Look of the Day." Each day we took photos of outfits paired with colorful makeup and inspired text descriptions about the beauty in disability. These posts were formulated as resistance to the eugenic discourse pervading the early days of the pandemic that argued disabled and elderly deaths were acceptable and probable. In contrast to this bleak assessment, this artistic series sought to affirm disability through uplifting portraiture.

KEYWORDS disability, photography, COVID-19, beauty, Instagram

Project Description, Origin Story, and Purpose

During the pre-vaccine period of the COVID-19 pandemic, we—Bethany Stevens and Sara Palmer—created a photo and essay series entitled "Corona Look of the Day." Each day, Bethany created artful outfits, paired with colorful makeup and inspired text descriptions. These descriptions worked as lessons on how to view and appreciate the disabled body during a time when eugenic discourse was pervading the globe. The poses of Bethany's disabled embodiment staring defiantly at the viewer expressed resistance to the isolated days filled with fear of death. Many people publicly expressed that only disabled and elderly people would suffer in the pandemic as if that was supposed to be a good thing, and this project claimed the beauty of disability in response to such violent devaluation of our existence.

A significant draw of the project was the effort to put disability in an atypical social context—that of luxury and style. There is a certain agency that we can express through makeup and fashion. In doing this project, we also learned a lot about how to pose and work a camera. In this way, we countered a prevailing social assumption that disabled people are not fashionable, that we are focused only on comfort over style. Similarly, seeing someone

like disabled model and actor Jillian Mercado model for mainstream brands changes the game for the ways we can demand to be viewed.

We wanted to present something beautiful, stylish, and with a heavy dose of attitude. And people tuned in. We accrued many followers on social media who commented on how the posts shaped their day for the better. Many came to rely on the images to help uplift their days. They returned day after day to comment and like. We didn't expect this degree of response. We were mostly doing this to pass the time of being stuck away from the world.

Most of the posts in this project were tagged with the phrase #CoronaEugenics. While not exactly the trendiest of phrases, we felt it was an important one because of the historical moment in which we found ourselves. It seemed all too apparent to us that the political landscape around the coronavirus was steeped in eugenics. People talked about the virus as something that was "only" dangerous to the elderly and the disabled. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities were heavily impacted and not enough attention has been directed to the needs of these communities. Our country has failed us all and blames us for having health issues—some of which have already almost resulted in our death—and so we may as well die. We know that many of the comorbidities that people experience are direct results of social oppression; social determinants of health tell us that discrimination kills. Yet our deaths will be and are being deemed reasonable or acceptable because we already have a diagnosis.

At various crisis points in the pandemic, healthcare facilities engaged in rationed care in favor of more able-bodied patients, reserving life-saving equipment for those deemed most likely to survive. Ableist presumptions about quality of life provided a rationale for these decisions. As disabled people, we are not consulted about our experience of our own quality of life; it's an ableist presumption.¹

In a different type of eugenic performance, rather than donning masks to protect vulnerable individuals, people continued to party with reckless abandon. These trends were viscerally grotesque. The violence of these actions will not be forgotten, if we move forward. It was as though society wanted us to die so that they could continue living life as before.

We wanted to contest the notion that vulnerable bodies are disposable. Eugenics has a long and complex history in the world, but at its core is the idea that certain kinds of bodies should be celebrated while others should be extinguished. We wanted to fight this idea by celebrating a disabled body, the very kind of body that modern eugenics deems an acceptable loss in a pandemic. We needed to communicate in words and images that disabled bodies were worthy. Not only of care, but also as sites of joy and pleasure. Out of this need, the Corona Look of the Day project was born.

We must admit that the project was also a product of pandemic boredom. Bethany began documenting her daily outfits as a way to pass the time, taking selfies in the mirror in the early days of lockdown. Sara saw potential in this effort to contest the confines of isolation, in getting dressed up when there was nowhere to go. "Hand me your phone," she insisted, convinced that the aesthetics would improve if she handled the camera while her partner focused on posing.

Each day we set out to capture a fresh look. With makeup and clothing, with creative posing and camera angles, we tried to deliver a look to the internet that spoke of confidence, of disability pride. Accompanying each image was a short essay post that began with a description of the image to clarify the aesthetic to non-sighted audiences (a basic principle of accessibility), followed by a rumination on the pandemic and the importance of loving disability. Pedagogical in nature, these posts were crafted to teach people, both sighted and not, to engage with disability as something that could be appreciated in its own right, instead of as a marker of despair. For example, Bethany frequently flaunted her protruding sternum to highlight how it could be considered an artful difference and not simply a medicalized deformity.

Technically, we grew a lot as the months progressed. We graduated from an iPhone to an exchangeable-lens camera. We learned to edit photos and refine makeup and costuming. We eventually put together a home studio with fabric backdrops. All in all, we composed over 250 photos of which we share a select few here. Following each image is the original social media text in italics.

Project Samples

April 24, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

144 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: checkered dress laying on the patio ground, stretched in the sun showing off how short I am! Yes, friends I'm just short enough to be magical and def short enough to be a little person. I get the best of many worlds, and the little people world (our community) is pretty damn dope. I need to go back to the conventions and frolic more, on the other side of COVID-19.

When laying in the sun, I think about what I want to do when I am free from quarantine. While travel, domestic and international are calling my wanderlust soul, I just want to cuddle with friends for days and I kinda hate cuddling. True thing about Ols (my primary diagnosis - osteogenesis imperfecta) is we tend to run hot temperature wise, so cuddle parties and large other piles of people never applied to this sexpert! But after quarantine, I am all in with breaks and maybe a cold compress on my head. Adapt your cuddle!!! .

[#pandemicstyle](#) [#pandemicfashion](#) [#lovemybody](#) [#fuckedgenetics](#) [#lovedisability](#) [#sexology](#) [#somaticart](#) [#bodyart](#) [#loveisresistance](#)

[View all 12 comments](#)

Add a comment...

April 26, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

77 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: zebra print dress in front of my wheel. Today's image reflects feeling like I'm rolling through some exhausting bs with a bit more clarity and grounding energy. Yay to my wife for providing stability through the storm and for finally being able to reach for soul nourishing books and read them after a comprehensive exam mental shutdown. .

It makes sense that bell hooks would be part of my journey back to me. She has taught me so much about self-love through her emotionally vulnerable work. Returning to her work after journeying through a lot of [#sobriety](#) literature helps me reconceptualize the next stage of my path. I want to know more about what motivated me to keep drowning myself in booze. When it stopped being a tool of liberation and fun and became a tool of my domination. I was trapped with booze, so excavating the whys and the length of time I needed that coping strategy is important now. It is painful and annoying work. A wise friend said that to heal from [#trauma](#) you have to sit in it; to move from addiction, you have to sit with it without medicating the pain to oblivion. I have to sit with this dumpster fire mayhem in me so I can learn how to do so without harming myself via drinking or other forms of self-sabotage. .

Pandemic time is solid time to sit with feelings and books! I'm grateful to have a wife and friends who teach me so much about being human.

.

[#pandemicfashion](#) [#pandemicstyle](#) [#wheelchair](#) [#fuckeugenics](#) [#eugenics](#) [#lovedisability](#)
[#pandemicphilosopher](#) [#soberanddisabled](#) [#sobercrip](#) [#boozeless](#) [#alcoholfree](#) [#awakening](#)
[#loveisresistance](#)

[View all 6 comments](#)

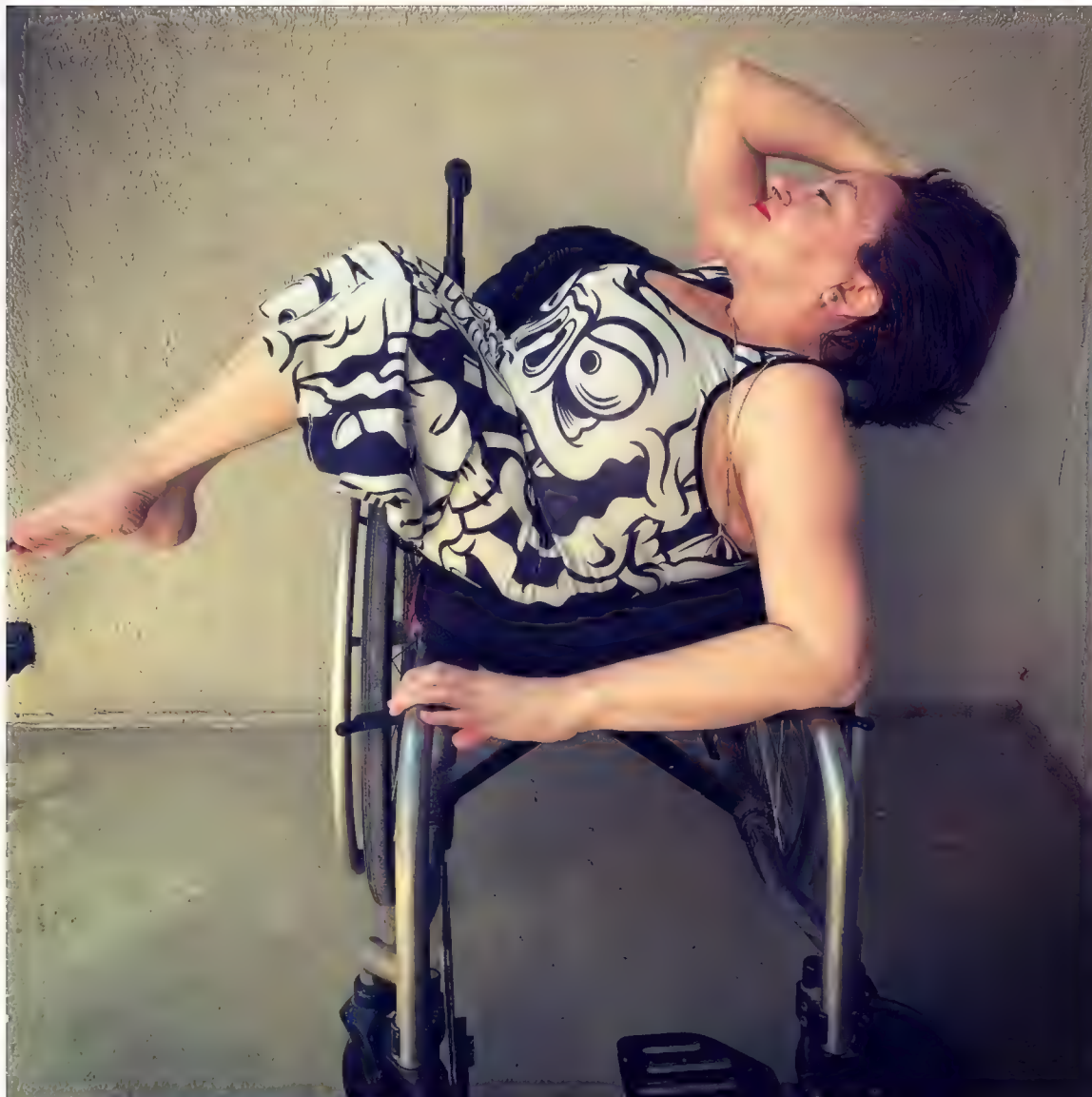
[Add a comment...](#)

April 28, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

107 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: monster @sourpussclothing black and white dress on whilst reclining in my wheelchair. My energy level is at near zero, my eyes are heavy and I just want to sleep. I am having a hard time sleeping at night, and a hard time being awake during the day. Even when I am not sleeping, I am not really awake. These past few days have felt like a daze. I'm trying to be gentle with myself and let go of productivity, after taking furious notes on things to explore when lucid. Going to lay down now and dream of sleeping. .

#pandemicfashion #pandemicstyle #halfasleep #wheelchairstyle #disabilitylove #fuckeugenics
#loveyourbody #loveisresistance

[View all comments](#)

Add a comment...

July 23, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

189 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or gratitude and LOVE to my fabulous chosen family, supportive spouse, and means of enhancing my pleasure like the @lovecrave - I love y'all! 💋💕💋

Seated on a table on the patio, I am wearing grey animal print sheer shorts and my favorite black [#FauxFurCoat](#). With no shirt on and my coat covering my nipples, the delicious silver vibrator I love teaching is highlighted between my asymmetrical breasts. Students feel excited to ask me if it's the vesper so we share a pleasure moment in the classroom! I'm completing the look with [#CateyeLiner](#), black ballet slippers, silver hoop earrings, and a glossy pink lip on my somewhat serious face. This is my greatest [#smize](#) to date! It's hard!!! 🙌🔥🙌

.
.

Today, I want to give deep love and gratitude to those who are sustaining my life right now!! My wife of almost 9 years (whoaaaaa!!) and chosen family from various stages of life who help me manage my [#ChronicDepression](#), with some triggered by [#ChronicPain](#), so that I may get through this [#dissertation](#) writing part of [#PhDLife](#). Writing feels often painful to get out and the process is certainly messy AF, so having my co-conspirators being [#AccountabilityPatners](#) and manifesting dreams believers keeps me going! Thanks all of y'all!! Truly, it takes so many of you to me keep me going, along sex toys enhancing my pleasure to stay as balanced as a can [#MovingForward](#). Much love & gratitude y'all! 💋💕💋

.

[#pandemicfashion](#) [#covidart](#) [#queerantime](#) [#disabilityrepresentation](#) [#coatsofinstagram](#) [#coatweek](#)
[#pleasureactivism](#) [#chosenfamily](#) [#queerfamily](#) [#citeblackwomen](#) [#disbilityjustice](#) [#ableism](#)
[#coronaeugenics](#) [#eugenics](#) [#thirstythursday](#) [#bodyliberation](#) [#lovedisability](#) [#loveisresistance](#)

View all 14 comments

Add a comment...

August 14, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

194 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or going Gaga for a day and it feels great!

Seated on the table on the patio, I'm wearing a bikini I have had for awhile. It's a shiny black multi-strapped bikini top matched with black [#boyshorts](#) that have white polka dots, along with [#SkullsandCrossbones](#) on them. I'm wearing my wildest accessory - studded [#epaulets](#) that have simple

pens to attach them, here they are attached with wall adhesive. They are intended to invoke the dramatic artful feel of the impeccable @ladygaga, the first person I have heard sing positively about #BeingDisabled. We danced to her music at our wedding, and @maria_town cited #EdgeofGlory in her speech during the ceremony. Gaga is important to our not so bad romance! My make-up is a goth symphony of purples, pinks, blue, and a bit of silver all from the #ElectricPalette by @urbandecaycosmetics. The dark purple shades on my lips is compliments of @forbidden_starfruit. Check out her podcast - #DirtyPanties! My hair is pushed back and wet to add further dramatic appeal of the epaulets and dark makeup. They seem they may be protective from #microaggressions and people coming to close when I'm not sealed away in my house. Yesss, fashion yields power!

My #PolkaDots cutie theme continues with a switch to a bikini because it's Friday and soon @sarapalmer4747 and I will have a date. This is the truth: ya gotta work on love! 9 years is long enough in marriage to have lost interest in many things, including life, but we still play and chatter like we new lovers! Friday night is one of the most relaxed times of the week for us. I made this a #GothGirl look because the epaulets screamed: "use me to dominate the viewer!" Naturally, I complied. Hope you get the yummy feeling of being topped, on this fabulous Friday! May we all have time to lick our wounds, celebrate the victories of our work, and most importantly honor surviving the storm of this week!

#pandemicfashion #covidart #queerantime #queerlove #gothaesthetic #gothmakeup #disabilityfashion #cateyemakeup #lovegaga #lamaMonster #femmedomme #getonyourknees #ableism #coronaeugenics #eugenics #bodyliberation #lovedisabledbodies #lovedisability #loveisresistance

View all 20 comments

Add a comment...

September 11, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

94 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or celebrating **fabulosity** this Friday by breaking down sexual ableism for ya!

Seated on a table in our dining room studio with a black backdrop, I'm wearing an animal print slip dress as a pencil skirt with a black tank and a fab faux fur coat. Keeping with the theme of shiny things bribing me joy, I'm rocking a shimmering skirt with my rose-gold eyeshadow and bronzer. The [#BetsyJohnson](#) 3/4 length sleeve coat is one of my favorite [@ragorama](#) (I miss you soooo!!!) finds, and thank goodness we are moving into little coat season soon for my Libra love of my birth month! I completed the look with my silver [#clitoris](#) pendant, [@stevemadden](#) ballet flats with pearl and sequin ankle straps, along with my usual [#RussianRed](#) lip.

I'm continuing to shine through pain, including with my sequin top that gives it a graphite wet look, along with the twinkle in my mischievous eyes. To celebrate Friday, I wanted to share rationale for my thirst trap

/ sex kitten photos. I'm not just ridiculously comfortable naked (blame it on the Bay Area art projects I did in sex grad school) truly, I work to fight daily against the [#desexualization](#) of [#DisabledPeople](#). Too often social assumptions and myths stemming from [#SexualAbleism](#) entails the tired assumption that those of us with visible disabilities are not interested in sex or capable of being sexual partners. While some disabled people are asexual as a sexual orientation, many of us have and desire robust sex lives. We are so often simply people trying to date, love, and explore pleasure with others in a difficult dating world saturated in systems of power teaching us which people are desirable! Media representation reinforces and perpetuates this image of sexless innocent disabled people. My images with smoldering eyes and living the lingerie life are in protest against these flattening, boring ideas of disability. I enjoy my sexuality and expression. I encourage you to think about who you consider is hot and how disability fits into conceptions of beauty. Desire is political. Cheers to celebrating another Friday! Wishing y'all the best. ❤️

[#covidart](#) [#coronaeugenics](#) [#bodylove](#) [#lovedisability](#) [#loveisresistance](#)

[View all 14 comments](#)

[Add a comment...](#)

November 27, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

171 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or celebrating letting go of that which doesn't serve me!

Seated on a table in our studio with a white backdrop, I'm rocking an adorable black bustier romper with white polka dots. I paired the look with [#HollyGolightly](#) inspired make-up, including a peachy shimmering smile and fab pink heels. I'm a lady of queer leisure, never to pass as normative. I'm too queer crip femme

to try. Also, note my silver vibrator hanging on my sternum – the part of my body that I have held the most shame in my life. I wanted to shave it down, cover it implants, hide my body. No longer!

I'm so tired of carrying weight of thinking I could ever be normal. Even if I continued to walk, I would be wobbling with a cane slowly. I bloody hated it – I was too slow, I felt unprotected, and my gait has always been out unbalanced (perfect for a little libra). I'm grateful I gave up walking at 13 years old. Wheels are liberating, never confining. To be able to show off my sternum and feel attractive is a revelation! Here's to living as much of our authentic selves as we discover nuances along the way! 🦋🦋🦋

View all 18 comments

Add a comment...

Project Reflection

Looking back on these posts, something we remember most was the urgency of needing to post almost daily in the time before the vaccine. While the project continues at a more leisurely pace post-vaccine, the first year of the pandemic was a time in which we felt it was very important to share a celebration of a disabled subject as life-sustaining resistance to the collective acceptance of disabled and elderly death. It was a way to simply get through the day and fight the onslaught of pandemic depression that has impacted so many.

The eugenic discourse of COVID-19—the aggressive apathy about lives lost and the willingness to sacrifice the most vulnerable with ease—continues to be an enraging and exhausting force. This project was designed to be an intervention on the eugenic assumptions about the value of disabled lives. Celebration of disabled bodies is a radical act when dominant discourses continue to deem such bodies expendable.

By promoting disability style and fashion, we wanted to show that disabled people have the right to thrive even in the context of isolation. In a country that continues to be lax about COVID safety protocols, so many disabled people have no other option but to stay home to protect their health. Segregation continues to be enacted on us. At the same time, this time of isolation could be approached as a source of strength and aesthetic delight: Isolation insulates from everyday experiences of ableism, making it easier to focus on the beauty of disability. Above all, we wanted to fight the idea that disabled people are acceptable deaths in COVID times. So strong is this apathy that it feels as though some in power almost want to be rid of disabled people altogether. They wanted us to die, but we chose to look fabulous in resistance instead.²

Notes

1. A few illustrative articles include Bo Chen and Donna Marie McNamara, "Disability Discrimination, Medical Rationing and COVID-19," *Asian Bioethics Review* 12, no. 4 (2020): 511–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00147-x> < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00147-x> >; and Emily M. Lund, Anjali J. Forber-Pratt, Catherine Wilson, and Linda R. Mona, "The COVID-19 Pandemic, Stress, and Trauma in the Disability Community: A Call to Action," *Rehabilitation*

Psychology 65, no. 4 (2020): 313–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000368> <
<https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000368>>. ↩

2. Earlier in the essay, we mentioned Jillian Mercado <<https://www.instagram.com/jillianmercado/>> (whose Instagram account is linked here) as one important example of a disabled creative who has changed the game for ways we can demand to be viewed. Other examples of fabulous resistance by disabled creators include Sky Cubacub <<https://www.instagram.com/rebirthgarments/>> and Aaron Rose Phillip <https://www.instagram.com/aaron__philip/>. ↩

Author Information

Sara Palmer

Sara Palmer is a technologist working at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

[View all of Sara Palmer's articles.](#)

Bethany Stevens

Bethany Stevens is a queer femme wheelchair-using sexpert & disability consultant completing a doctoral degree in sociology at Georgia State University. Trained as an attorney, as well as with a master of arts in Sexuality Studies, she has a diverse background of interests that ground her sexuality education work in human rights. She has lectured and offered workshops internationally and has taught courses in public health, disability studies, and social work in five states.

[View all of Bethany Stevens's articles.](#)

Article details

Sara Palmer and Bethany Stevens , "Corona Look of the Day: Social Media Posts About Disabled Beauty and Resistance in the Time of COVID-19," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.8>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

DISTORIES

by DISTORIES | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT DISTORIES is a small open-source and open-access Instagram zine project, gathering testimonies from disabled contributors. This project began in the context of the summer of 2021, as mask mandates and general precautions around COVID-19 were being relaxed. Each chapter of the zine is introduced by a question, framing stories and snapshots of experience as well as demands, affirmations, and dreams shared by contributors. The project was stewarded by geunsaeng ahn from September 2021 to July 2022.

KEYWORDS disability, crip, pandemic, COVID-19, zine, Instagram, visibility

Curatorial Note

For the present excerpt, sections editors Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas selected chapters 2, 3, 4, 9, 11, and 12—six out of the total of twelve chapters of DISTORIES at the time of this writing. Our aim in curating this excerpt was to share selections that we felt convey the breadth of what DISTORIES contains—from recording painful interpersonal losses and ruptures in trust and community to stories of interdependence and care; from cries of rage to scathing cultural criticism in the shape of specific demands; from expressions of affirmation and solidarity to calls and visions for radical new worlds. Some—many—of the excerpts express gradients of rage, resentment, desperation; and may elicit a breadth of feelings, in response. While we recognize that some readers may find some of these excerpts difficult or discomfiting, these voices are necessary to include, and paint the larger picture of disability experience during the pandemic. We kept intact the entire set of contributor voices for each chapter, and only lightly edited for typographical errors that might cloud meaning. The questions addressed by each of these chapters are:

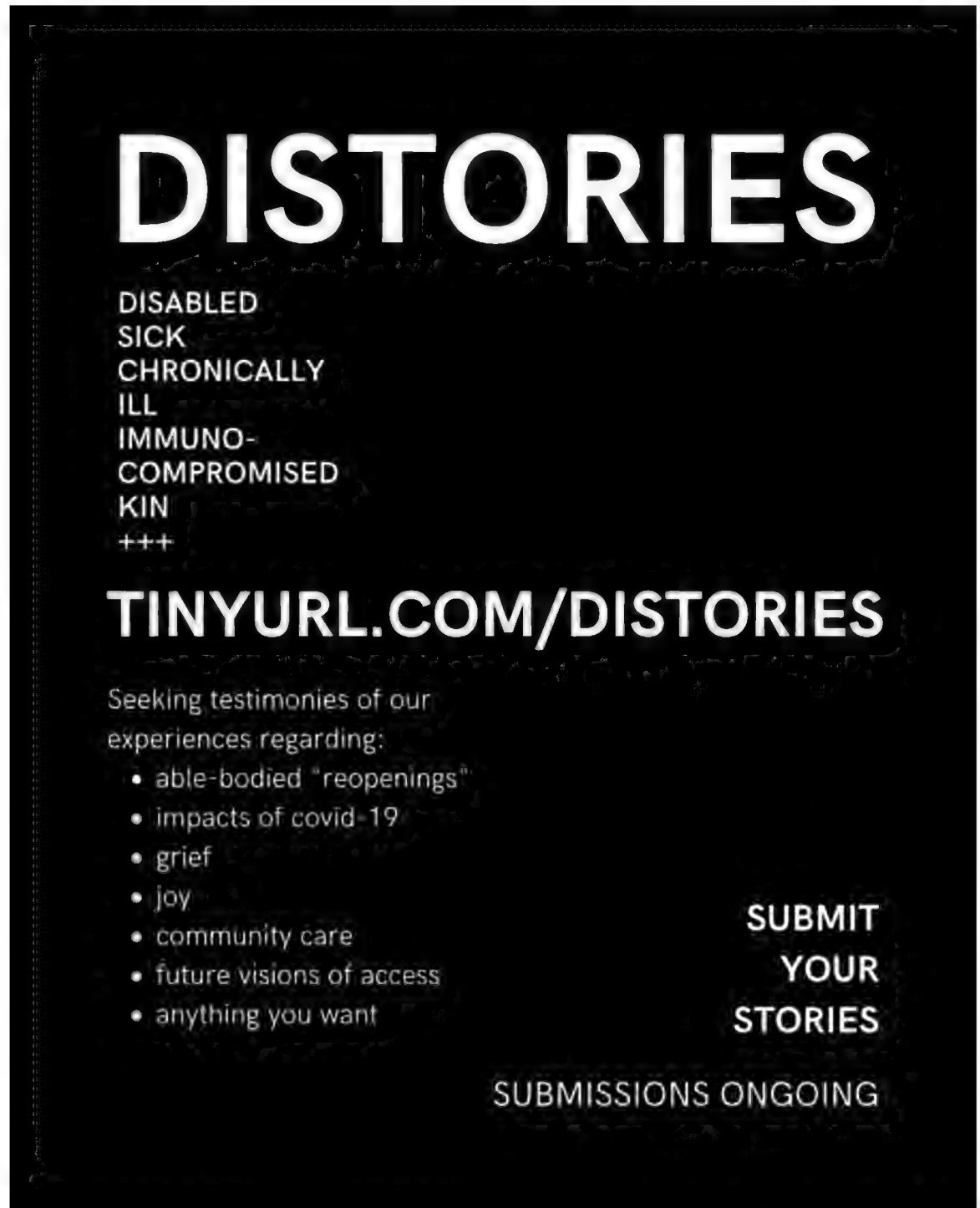
- 2: "How has the pandemic impacted your relationships?"
- 3: "How do you feel about 'most' of society 'reopening' at this stage in the pandemic?"
- 4: "If you could tell society what we could be doing better for our community, what would you like to tell them?"
- 9: "What would you like to demand from your friends, family, community, and/or society right now?"
- 11: "Do you have an affirmation that you would like to share with our community?"

- 12: "What is your dream world of accessibility?"

How Our Contributing Authors Identify*

Actively Grieving	Disabled
Agender	Disabled Immigrant
Artist	Displaced
Art maker of many trades	Dyke
Autigender	East Asian
Bigender	Ex-Skid
Bipolar	Genderfucked
Black Woman	Immigrant
Blasian	Immigrant from Bengal
Brown	Immunocompromised
Chinese	Korean
Chronically Ill	Mad
Chronic Pain Sufferer	Mentally Ill
Chronically Pained	Mixed Heritage
Crazy	Muslim
Crippled	Neurodivergent
Crippunk	Non-Binary
Crazy	Poly
Queer	
Sex Worker	
Sick	
Sober	
Someone with a Chronic Medical Condition	
Spoonie	
Student	
Taurus	
Third Gen Dutch & Scott Canadian	
Trans	
Transgender	
Trans Genderfaun Bringer of Joy	
Young	
Zero Generation	

*Identities listed are from the sixteen authors' own descriptions of their identities from submissions as of July 2022.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/COVER-IMAGE-Distories-Flyer-Morgan-Outlaw.png> >

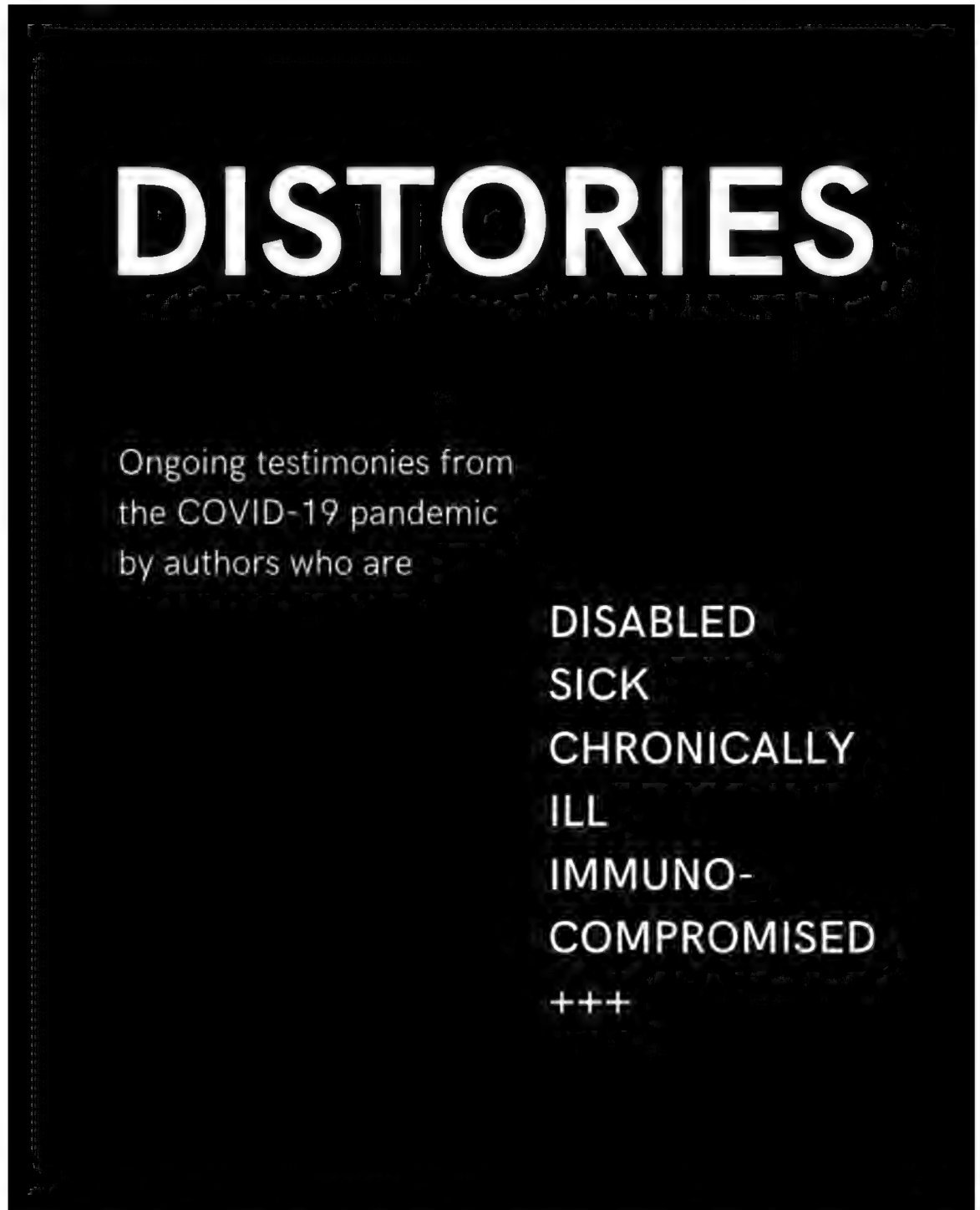
Figure 1. DISTORIES flyer.

Submissions are ongoing at [tinyurl.com/DISTORIES](https://www.tinyurl.com/DISTORIES) < <https://www.tinyurl.com/DISTORIES> > .

Submissions are published on a rolling basis at instagram.com/distoriesprojects <
<https://instagram.com/distoriesprojects>> and [linktr.ee/distories](https://www.linktr.ee/distories) <
<https://www.linktr.ee/distories>> .

Zine (selections)

Cover



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Distories-COVER-PAGE-Morgan-Outlaw.png> >

THE INTENTION OF DISTORIES

Distories welcomes all disabled, sick, immuno-compromised, chronically ill, chronically pained +++ folx to share their fully uncensored experiences regarding the able-bodied "reopening" of the world during the covid-19 pandemic (summer of 2021) and other impacts that the pandemic has had on our lives.

The primary hope of this project is to help us feel less alone by seeing more of our experiences amongst the algorithms.

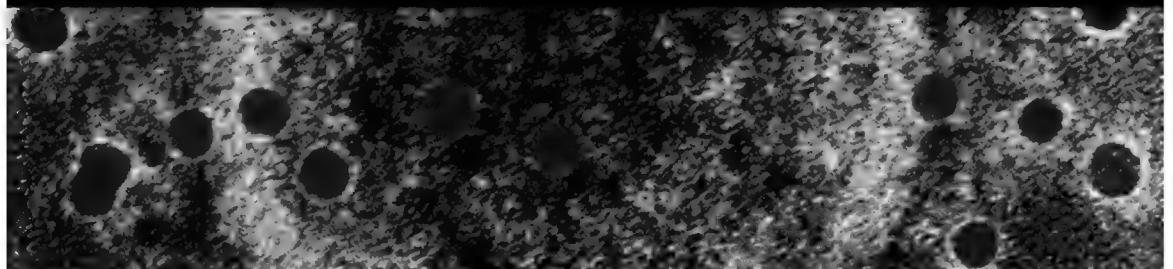
The second hope of this project is to confront able-bodied world in its perceptions of "access" and to be an ongoing reminder that our community is still here.

< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/page-1-about-Morgan-Outlaw.png> >

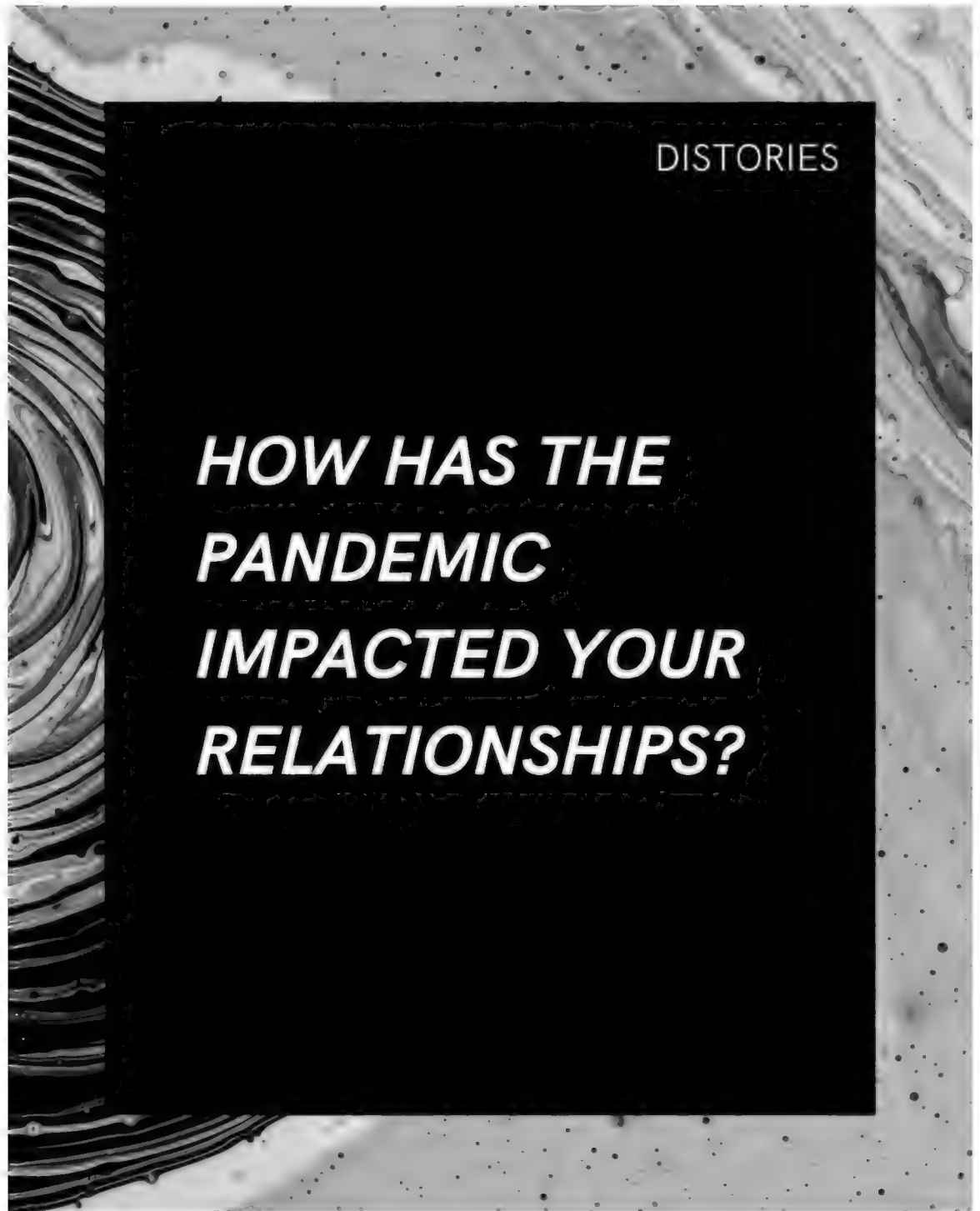
May this effort uplift and visibilize our experiences that continue to remain unwritten, unspoken, and unseen.

To honor the labor of the authors, please consider sending them monetary gratitudes through their payment platforms provided at the end of their stories.

The development and publishing of these stories will be at a slow pace (by ableist standards) due to members who are the caretakers of this project also being disabled, chronically ill, chronically pained, and immunocompromised. To this aim, please be mindful of this in the monitoring, development, and expectations of this project.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/p.2-about-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg> >



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CHAPTER-2-Slide-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg> >

"Finding support and meaningful connection in the pandemic has proven to be quite challenging. Allistic, and able bodied friends have mostly disappeared from my life into their own cliques, which I understand because the pandemic really reinforced people to huddle into affinity groups for survival. But where does that leave us melanated autistic and disabled folks functioning on crip time? My friend circle now is mostly disabled, sick and autistic long distance friends and I am amazed at the openness and the support they are always willing to give in spite of always being low capacity."

Sarmistha Talukdar
(they/them)
@tavishi.experiments
Venmo : @Sarmistha-Talukdar

"its been a mixed bag, in many ways its increased the distance between some relations and in other ways made reaching out and meeting up (online easier)."

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"The pandemic actually strengthened my relationship between my partner and I. I had to put faith in him to protect the family as he went to work every night and depended on him to get the food and other resources that we required through the months, including picking up my medicine.

We sat down more to talk and discuss our worries and what we wanted from each other and our family as a whole. We delegated jobs in the house according to needs and safety which helped to decrease stress. We started a motto, 'Better Together' as we worked more with each other rather than to fulfill our own needs."

Kyoko Heshiimu
(She/her)
Instagram: @dragonmomi8
Cashapp: \$KyokoHeshiimu
Facebook: @ Eko Speaks Art

"The pandemic has made me feel more insecure and ashamed in my relationships. Especially when trying to assess which of my relationships can really hold space for humility, understanding, and the 'checking' of able-bodied fragility/discomfort that comes with being in relationship with me (and my illnesses).

I try to give everyone the benefit of the doubt as I watch folx (on social media) out and about disregarding cautious protocols that could help protect our disabled, sick, ill, and high-risk community — and likely help us end the pandemic (and the next one that is likely coming) sooner.

I try to have empathy by reframing that maybe these folx likely have other things going on in their lives where they are willing to be more risk inclined with their exposure at this point. Because they need to engage in ableist-leaning actions because there aren't other outlets to escape from the grief and suffering that is constantly in everyone's face all the time. I am basically constantly having 'both/and' existential crises everyday to reckon with these thoughts analyzing other's actions.

It takes a toll on my heart because I have seen even less outlets for folx like us to use, go to, or places to even go 'out' to for 'disabled world'. So I end up with a lot of unwanted feelings of judgement, shame, and jealousy. It makes me hate my self and the body I've been forced to be in.

When I see my community members maskless in places or in high volume crowds, parties, cross-contaminating their care pods, etc I feel a huge trap door opening beneath me in the connection I thought I had with them.

It makes me feel like the values I shared with these folx I deeply care about are being discarded, betrayed, and abandoned. It hurts my heart because it reminds me that community care within able-bodied parameters always has a finite limit.

I then start to spiral by isolating myself even more to self-protect (which isn't helpful). At the same time, I'm terrified of being forgotten because I can't 'show up' in the same way that everyone else can who are more physically present (and able-bodied) in each other's lives right now. Either way I feel that I end up alone."

geunsaeng ahn
(they)
@ahntologies
PayPal: geunsaengahn@gmail.com

"It has given me more space within myself. It has given me a more realistic view of what's possible for me. Lots of alone time and time with my cat. It has also made me grateful for the friends I have, who are mostly queer and neurodivergent, because I feel that we appreciate each other more while going through this past two years."

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: [PayPal.me/CranioWithTai](https://www.paypal.me/CranioWithTai)
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"I have lost 2 of my best friends. People I spoke with on a regular basis. We drifted so far, and it felt like they were petty arguments but I realized very quickly how self-centered they were and that they weren't nearly as invested in building and maintaining our relationship as I was. I'm not re-evaluating what relationships mean to me because I'm unsure how to proceed now. I distanced myself from others too who were going in big trips and vacations abroad at the peak of the pandemic. I had to also move away from several covid deniers."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"I'm so tired of being isolated. At least before covid, friends would visit, we had extended kin parties and dinners, and I felt the warmth and safety of having a community. I haven't seen one of my partners since January 2020. Haven't seen my parents or brother since December 2019. I am lonely, and adrift, and it's so hard to stay connected to a world where I can't connect with the ones I love."

Blue
(they/them)
@cutecupcakeprince

"I think my family is sick of me. My partner is sick of me. No one touches me anymore. No one wants to hear it the catalog of aches and pains that debilitate me on a daily basis. This is standard though. The pandemic has only smushed us even closer together physically, and increased the spiritual gulf that separates us."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"The pandemic destroyed my sexuality completely, being deeply connected to power and agency, it's been very much at a loss. The stigma of bodies, both others and my own sick body has had complex emotional toll I know it will take years to work through and understand. The loss and grief in friendships has been tremendous. It's been so hard to try to hold empathy and understanding while repeatedly being treated as subhuman as a high risk/immune fucked person. I've learned even people I thought to be some of my closest people have no idea how to show the kind of care I've always believed was the baseline and foundation of those relationships. The abandonment and betrayal feelings so many of us endure in pandemic times is tremendous."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"I don't think my family will feel whole without my grandmother again. She was the matriarch of our family. We are still working to take care of each other, but it's been really hard. We all live in different time zones and work or study on different schedules, which makes communication difficult. Some of us have health issues or are recovering from surgery. There are members of my family who are having difficulty processing her passing. We have other members of our extended family who are anti-vaxxers. Others are trying to make funeral arrangements, manage family life, and work full-time in frontline service jobs. It's a lot of strain on the heartstrings, on top of all of this macro-level social stress."

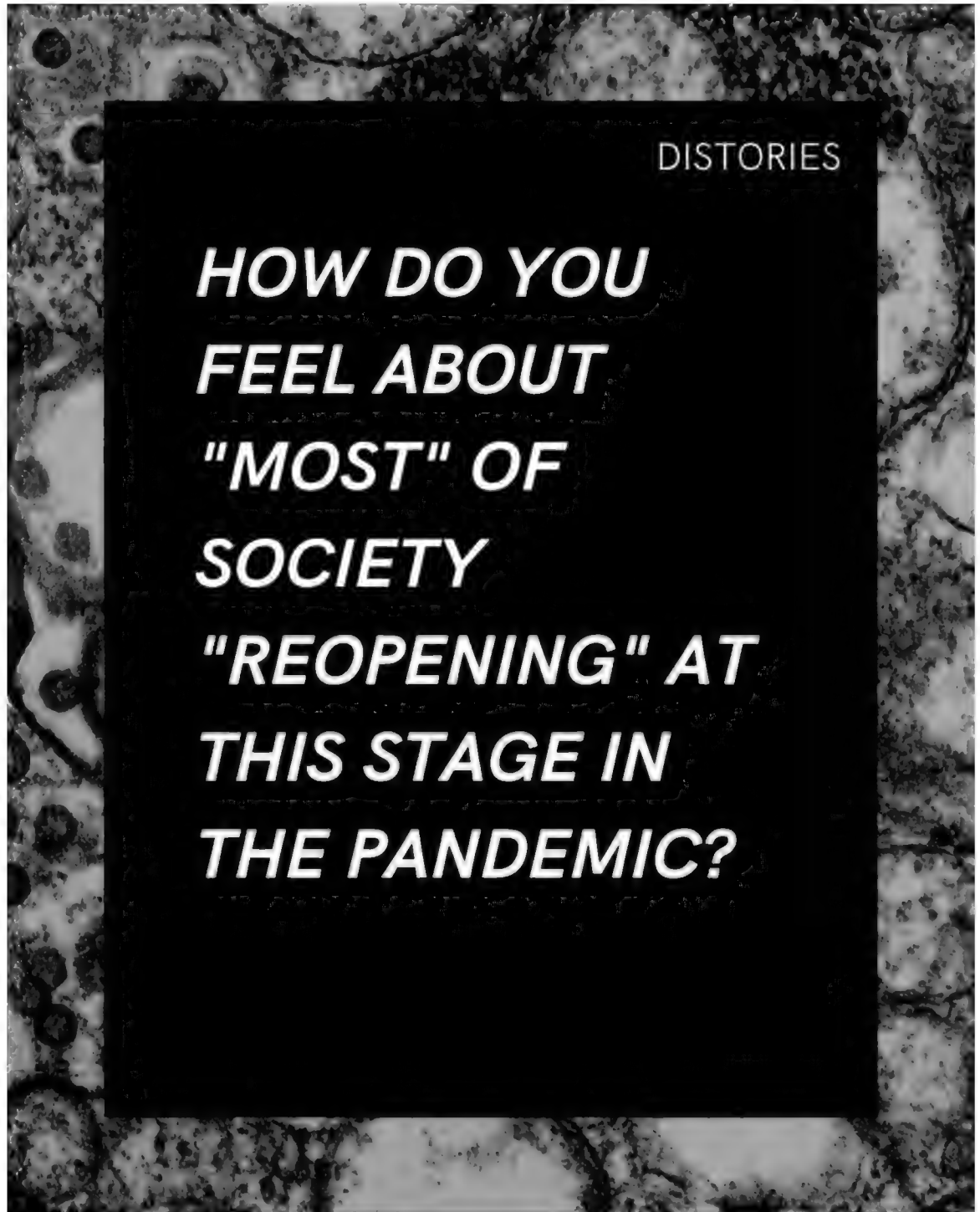
Author wished to remain anonymous

"This has been the hardest part. When the vaccine was rolled out I watched my partner and most of everyone I know pretty much stop taking precautions. My partner started going out and gathering in crowds and large groups frequently without a mask. They exposed me to covid on my birthday and offered me no recognition of how their behavior had been reckless and inconsiderate towards me as I'd been disabled by covid. I left the relationship. My best friend of ten years who took care of me during the early days of longcovid – we had to weather a lot of shit and the darkness of that period still leads to fights and trouble in our dynamic now. I became unable to care for myself in the most basic ways literally overnight, I had to rely on the able bodied people around me and they often didn't understand how to support me. I didn't have a large and varied support system when that happened. This has been a huge source of grief."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"My partner and I are both disabled and immunocompromised. But we had been living with my folks at the start of the pandemic. When masks started being taken away, my folks quickly shed theirs. 'They are so annoying' they would say 'and for what?'. My partner and I had to move out. They, in 2021, decided that the best way would be to go back to school masters. They got into a university in Colorado and we moved. But I'm bad at holding back and so I told my folks I was leaving because they couldn't respect my disability. As a queer person, they claimed I piled too much on them at once and it was hard for them to adjust. I stopped feeling bad about that after 2 years though. By the time I left, it had been 5. My mom and I talk sometimes, my Dad apologized as I was leaving and continues to wear masks. Can't remember the last time I talked to my sisters. But my partner and I are stuck together like glue. At least we have each other."

Snow (they/them)



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CH-3-Slide-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg> >

"Shut the whole thing down."

Sarmistha Talukdar
(they/them)
@tavishi.experiments
Venmo : @Sarmistha-Talukdar

"i curl into the corner of the subway wearing an n95 on my way to my fourth doctor's appointment of the week. i click through instagram stories of friends in clubs, friends in restaurants, friends celebrating 'normal' & flinch away when someone coughs in the waiting room. i'm laying in a hospital bed during pride weekend, feeling worlds away from clubs and parties and streets packed with maskless people, hot moving bodies & my iv drip is so cold in my arm. i don't get to hold out on the statistics looking good, chances are not in my favor. i'm trying to swallow the bitterness of being left behind. i hope one day my world will be the same as theirs."

venus
(they/them)
Twitter: @v1v1section
Venmo: @evyix

"Super anxious. I never loved the 'normal'; I think a society in which the disabled, marginalized and historically excluded are an afterthought is a failed society."

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"I think it is too soon. I don't think enough precautions have been kept in place to keep the most vulnerable safe. removing masks and allowing crowds to congregate in closed confined spaces has allowed for more infectious variants like Delta to spread and kill more people unnecessarily. They should have waited for at least 70-75% of society to be vaccinated before opening."

Kyoko Heshiimu
(She/her)
Instagram: @dragonmomi8
Cashapp: \$KyokoHeshiimu
Facebook: @ Eko Speaks Art

"this notion of 'reopening' is an illusion in order for capitalism, egos, and individualism to thrive. if we all wore masks, continued to social distance, kept in-person gatherings to a minimum, and followed protocols from the beginning, we would not have all of these variants and people continuing to die from this virus everyday (yes, people are STILL dying— did you all forget?). and, those dying are people who often don't have the resources to stay safe. or, are suffering in isolation. this is just an ongoing nightmare while the able-bodied individualist world is continuing to have their parties."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Terrible. I tried to go back to physical society and the burnout was so bad I have been experiencing situational mutism and shutdowns/meltdowns for months after. Also terrible because of the blatant disregard of disabled people and also the movement away from Connecting online which has brought me and many disabled people comfort in these times. Online should be one norm, not just something that can be disregarded and forgotten"

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: PayPal.me/CranioWithTai
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"The government has money at it's disposal to pay citizens to stay at home while we manage costs, but they won't do it because of the greed. We are expendable as long as the money keeps flowing and we beg for another paltry \$1,000. On the whole, disabled folks have been first to sacrifice on a consistent regular basis, and we're so far in that people have simply accepted that people will get sick and die. It's really disheartening and exemplifies how essential mutual aid efforts are to keep marginalized people safe and alive."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"I am being eaten alive by terror every. Single. Day. I have doctors appointments I can't miss or I will get much sicker or lose progress, and every time I have to be in public my heart is in my throat. When someone coughs it feels like ice gripping my lungs. My roommates work with the public and that scares me too, even though they take precautions almost no one does anymore. I feel sick when I see people without masks, at parties, or eating in restaurants. How can so many people not care about human lives? About my life, our lives, the lives of sick & disabled people and children who can't get vaccinated? How can I believe that there are good people in the world, or that humanity is worth redeeming, when people actively choose death over inconvenience? The specter of death follows me at every step and how can I ever stop grieving when people are dying of a preventable illness because abled & well people don't give a sh*t about anyone, even their parents, even their kids, even sometimes themselves."

Blue
(they/them)
@cutecupcakeprince

"I am deeply saddened by the level of nonchalance that many seem to be affecting. I cannot believe how many Americans have chosen not to be vaccinated. There are countries begging for the vaccine and we are throwing it away in the trash. It is shameful."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"People are in crisis fatigue, the imperfections and helplessness are raw and exposed. Individualism is fucking us all, racialized, working class, houseless, undocumented, disabled, struggling people especially. I see people giving up because they we're never given consideration, and self centering out of exhaustion. I know the ethic of economy over people is to blame for the botched priorities of the state."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"They yell and shout about how it's their 'personal freedom', completely ignoring all of the people hurting and dying in their wake. Pure selfishness."

Juniper Harwood
(it/its)
@howdyitsjunebug
Cashapp/Venmo: @queerphoria

"Anybody who is frequently gathering in large groups without a mask needs to recognize that they are hardly any better than people who won't get vaccinated. If you're going to clubs, traveling, gathering for parties without getting tested, or anything similar — you're part of the problem. When the media and anyone else says it's a pandemic of the unvaccinated this suggests they don't give a fuck about children, immunocompromised people and all other high risk groups. I'm so sick of seeing the people in my life act above a virus that disabled me."

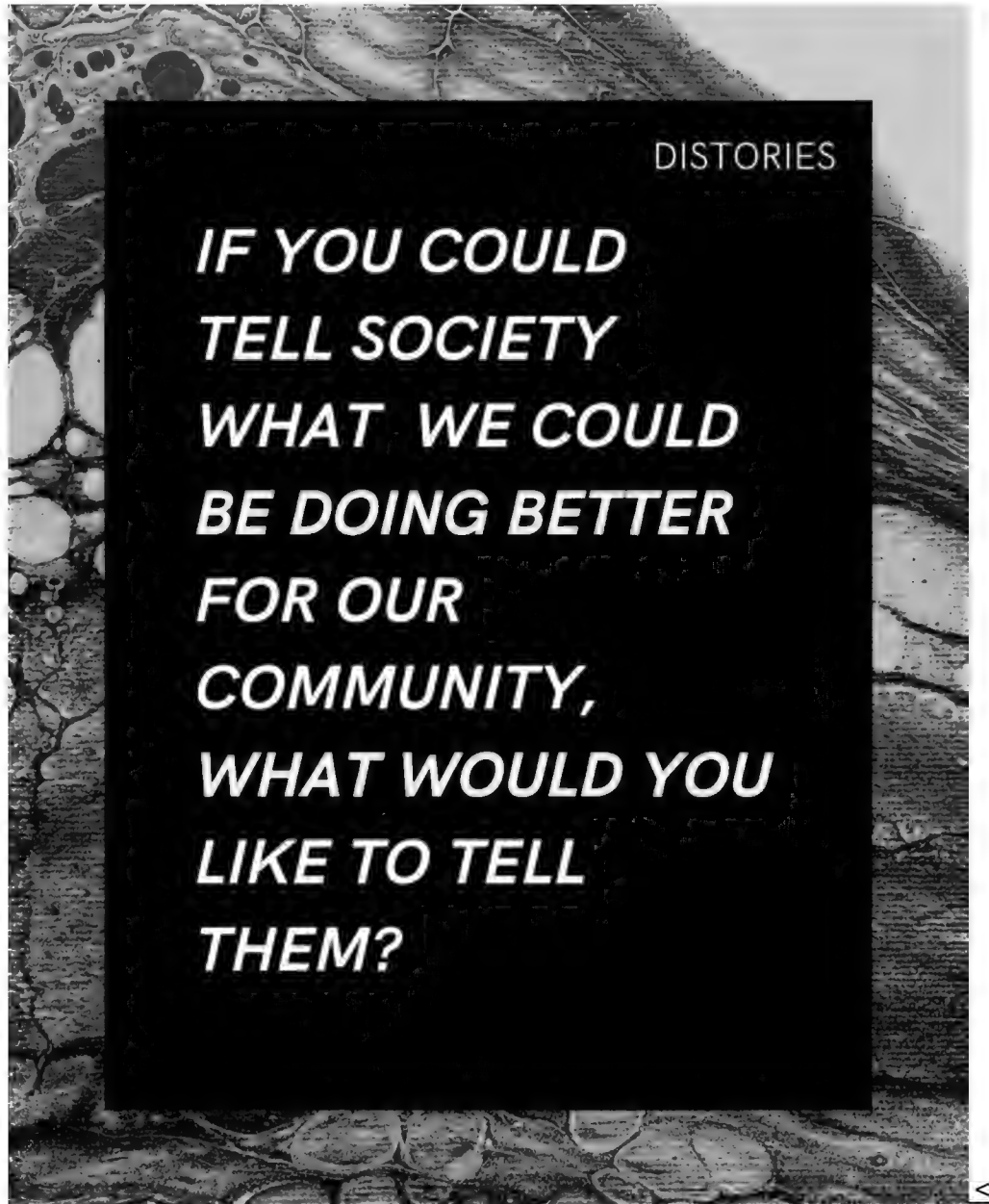
Author wished to remain anonymous

"My brother told me that chronically ill and immuno compromised people should be locked up and everyone else should get to live a normal life. I guess he got what he wanted."

Lavender
(They/Them)
Instagram: @therunawaygrunge
Twitter: @runawaygrunge
PayPal: Paypal.me/therunawaygrunge
Wealthsimple Cash: \$runawaygrunge
Cash App: \$runawaygrunge

"You can't look at someone and tell they are disabled. You can't. It is a disservice to the entire world to not wear a mask. I've been wearing masks since before the pandemic in public because of my condition. NO ONE had a problem with me until after the pandemic started. If I get sick, it means all my symptoms are cranked up to a ten as my body tries to fight the other thing going on and myself at the same time. It takes forever to "get better" leaving me bed ridden for weeks, sometimes months. Whatever normal you had before the pandemic was already my nightmare. We need to do better."

Snow (they/them)



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CH-4-Slide-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg>>

"Truly and deeply listen (not charity listen) to us (especially the most marginalized among us) for we hold the keys to a better, beautiful, abundant world, where no one is left behind."

Sarmistha Talukdar
(they/them)
@tavishi.experiments
Venmo : @Sarmistha-Talukdar

"To allow for remote working to stay accessible, to make events and meetings more blended (online and in person), to make healthcare universal, to pay caseworkers and what came to be known as essential workers living wages, to institute universal basic income, pay Black, Indigenous and colonized people reparations, give their lands back and to TAX the rich."

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"Stop shaming people when they mask up. Keep your distance when asked."

Kyoko Heshiimu
(She/her)
Instagram: @dragonmomi8
Cashapp: \$KyokoHeshiimu
Facebook: @ Eko Speaks Art

"Prioritize sick people.

I have chronic pain, but I have to work through headaches and pain, and joint pain, and gut issues as I work in an office, taking public transportation. All of these things take a toll on me but I have no other option.

Recognize that people do not have options and it's an immense privilege to be planning trips and brunches and parties when folks don't have their basic needs met on a consistent basis. Able bodied and healthy people need to be putting their money directly into the pockets of those in need, ensuring the moratorium does not expire, and providing safety and shelter for disabled/mentally ill/chronically ill people."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Wear masks, please don't go out and party a lot, get tested a lot, make sure to wear your mask again anywhere around other people...and keep on advocating for online spaces, in your work, school, community, etc. Ask your friends their preferred method of communication. Let's work toward being less ableist toward each other as a whole."

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: PayPal.me/CranioWithTai
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"If you are able to (if you do not have a health reason that is preventing you to do so), please continue to WEAR YOUR MASK!

If you do not have to, PLEASE STOP TRAVELLING. Can you all please just sit still? Lie down? How about some solidarity with bed-bound and home-bound folk? Maybe just this once? Like, is that too much to ask?

Please also stop travelling to places where they also have their case numbers low or under control. Like, how are we protecting our fellow people who are also globally compromised in this pandemic?

Please think about how you live and are in collective relationship with other people outside of what ableism, capitalism, and individualism tells you to do. PLEASE."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Get vaccinated. It's free & it protects you and your community! Be cautious, wear a mask, assume there are always vulnerable people around because we are everywhere. If you're not doing these things, know that we see you, and your actions speak loudly. We know you aren't safe, & that you don't care if we live or die."

Blue
(they/them)
@cutecupcakeprince

"Continue to be as flexible as you became during the great quarantine. All of a sudden, those doctor appointments that took me hours to build up energy for and cause me intense pain and hours of recovery time afterwards could be done on my phone! Astonishing! Suddenly now, that flexibility is disappearing and we are back to requiring enormous sacrifice for disabled and chronically ill people just to make it to a doctor's appointment so they can get my blood pressure and my weight in person."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Like all experiences, the pandemic is a teacher. The lesson it's carrying is crucial and urgent. It seeks to teach us that we are inherently interconnected beings. On a literal physical level we are dependent on one and other. We need to learn now, or too late that we are more than our physical selves and that we have responsibility to each other. There is so much beauty, power and remediation to be had in this lesson and I believe it is key to moving forward."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Get your shots. Do it for her. Do it for your parents, your grandparents, for everyone that couldn't. It's a pinch. Grief hurts more."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"COVID is worse than it's ever been in most places, likely than it's ever been. If you are not acting just as careful as you did when the pandemic started and you were scared as hell, then you're not reacting appropriately. This isn't the time to go to parties, festivals, or on vacation."

Juniper Harwood
(it/its)
@howdyitsjunebug
Cashapp/Venmo: @queerphoria

"Ask your disabled and chronically ill friends if they want a meal. Send them 20\$ for seamless or cook for them. Offer to do shopping or chores for them. Its been the single most frustrating experience of my life to struggle to meet my most basic needs and see that abled people around me are so clueless as to how to help me when its as simple as helping me out with a meal. Just ask us what we need. Stop offering unsolicited medical advice, we've likely heard and tried it all. Stop trying to fix us or the conditions in our life and ask us how we need help. We know best what help we need; don't come in with preconceptions and then feel rejected when we tell you we need help in a different way. We know best what our needs are. I've personally only wanted my friends to listen more and ask me what my needs are."

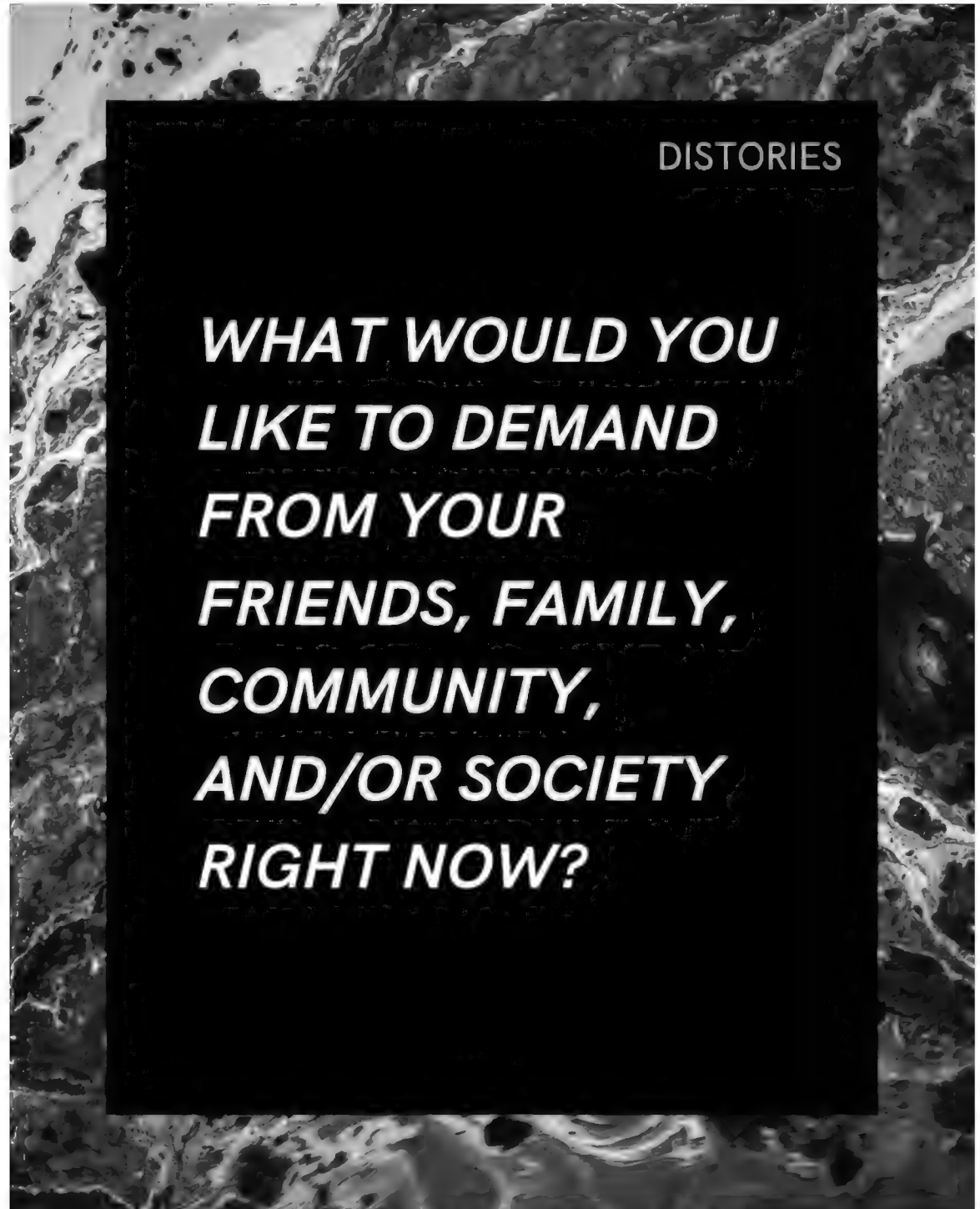
Author wished to remain anonymous

"You're killing people like me every day. You're ensuring that full service sex workers (many of whom are chronically ill or disabled) either can't work, transition to a whole new style of self employment (which requires internet access and privacy), or to risk their lives to make a living. You're keeping people trapped in their homes because a drink with friends is more important to you than our lives. Shame on you."

Lavender
(They/Them)
Instagram: @therunawaygrunge
Twitter: @runawaygrunge
PayPal: Paypal.me/therunawaygrunge
Wealthsimple Cash: \$runawaygrunge
Cash App: \$runawaygrunge

"You want normal, I want to live. There's a significant difference between those two things. Please recognize every time I go into public I am scared. I have a cane, a mask, am openly trans, and am sometimes with one or more of my partners. I am scared not because of stories but because of lived experiences. I've been yelled at for wearing a mask, yelled at for having a cane "as a young person", I've had my mobility devices broken by people who shrug it off as an accident, I don't want to be afraid to live! I don't want to be afraid..."

Snow (they/them)



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CH-9-slide-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg> >

"to keep wearing their masks, get vaccinated, help others get vaccinated (if there is no public vaccine available), push for a #peoplesvaccine, dismantle capitalism!!"

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"Please get vaccinated and stop feeling offended if you are asked to mask up even after you have been vaccinated. I have been vaccinated since February/March but I still mask up because I am still vulnerable. 95% is not 100% and I can't risk it right now. Be loving and caring. The level of worry I have about my health is scary and I want to be the least invasive to your life while still being included in society."

Kyoko Heshiimu
(She/her)
Instagram: @dragonmomi8
Cashapp: \$KyokoHeshiimu
Facebook: @ Eko Speaks Art

"Care > self-centered wishes. Please...if we have learned anything from this it's that we need to care about each other, we are not separate in many ways. I know you want to go out and socialize, but...please, consider that that could be at the cost of someone's life indirectly."

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: PayPal.me/CranioWithTai
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"The absolute biggest demand I have always had is for my health insurance. FUND MY TREATMENTS. Fund preventive care so I don't need ER visits and unplanned crises! Help me function, instead of waiting for me to fall apart and then tape me back together! Provide funding for daily healthy living, instead of throwing more pills at me."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Disabled and sick people hold so much value, and deserve to be at the forefront of a lot of conversations happening right now. We've been treated as completely disposable during this pandemic, more than usual, and it's time to listen."

Juniper Harwood
(it/its)
@howdyitsjunebug
Cashapp/Venmo: @queerphoria

"The bare minimum is masks and vaccines. The next step is creating access for others and ensuring that the rest of us can at least leave our homes without literally fearing for our lives."

Lavender
(They/Them)
Instagram: @therunawaygrunge
Twitter: @runawaygrunge
PayPal: Paypal.me/therunawaygrunge
Wealthsimple Cash: \$runawaygrunge
Cash App: \$runawaygrunge



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CH-11-Slide-Morgan-Outlaw-1.jpg> >

"Your love and vision is what makes the world go round"

Sarmistha Talukdar
(they/them)
@tavishi.experiments
Venmo: @Sarmistha-Talukdar

"You are not alone, we are in community, we need to keep speaking up and taking up space!"

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"We will get through this together"

Kyoko Heshiimu
(She/her)
Instagram: @dragonmomi8
Cashapp: \$KyokoHeshiimu
Facebook: @ Eko Speaks Art

"I'm with you. In your lonely moments. In your moments where you think you couldn't get lonelier, couldn't be more misunderstood. When all you want is someone to take care of you, ask you about how you're doing. I'm with you in that. Let's be held within each other's wishes, even if from afar. You're not alone —or maybe we are, but We are Alone Together...even across distances...we are still on this planet at the same moment in time. I'm with you."

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: PayPal.me/CranioWithTai
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"I would give all of you a hug if I could."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"You are worthy. Your life matters. You matter. The people that don't see that are not worth your precious time or energy."

Blue
(they/them)
@cutecupcakeprince

"Your pain, confusion, anger and disillusionment is real. It's okay to be imperfect, believe yourself."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"I'm not sure where to start, because we're all feeling a lot of feelings right now, and a lot of them are negative and weigh us down greatly. There is love, support and hope within our community. We care for each other in a way I've never known anywhere else. We've got us when no one else does. I love you all like family."

Juniper Harwood
(it/its)
@howdyitsjunebug
Cashapp/Venmo: @queerphoria

"Your needs aren't too great just because people in your life weren't able to meet them!"

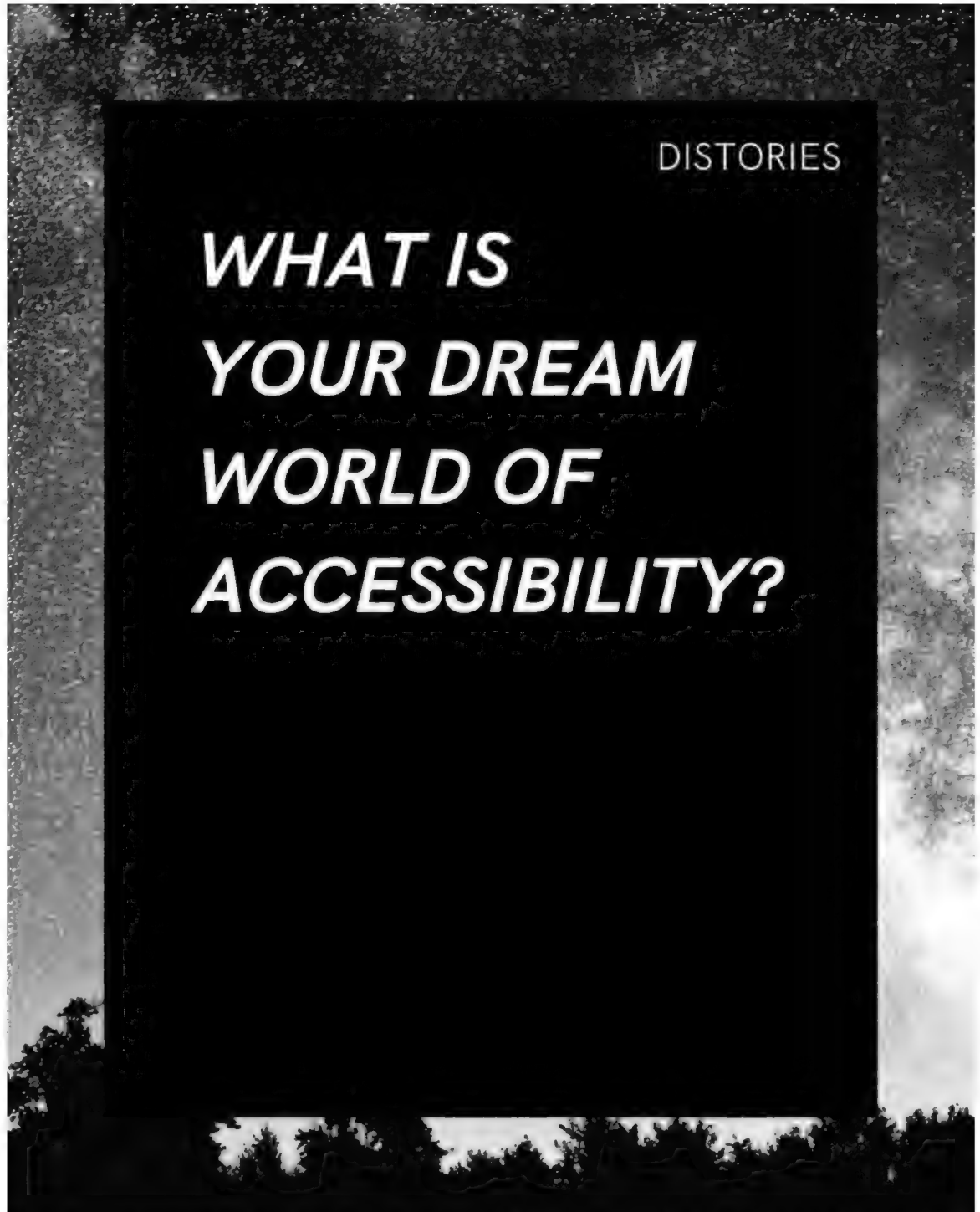
Author wished to remain anonymous

"You are a magical being. You endure things these other people could only imagine, and who cares if you do it with grace. Be loud, complain, ask for the things you need. Don't take less."

Lavender
(They/Them)
Instagram: @therunawaygrunge
Twitter: @runawaygrunge
PayPal: Paypal.me/therunawaygrunge
Wealthsimple Cash: \$runawaygrunge
Cash App: \$runawaygrunge

"You are worthy or respect. You are worthy of life. You deserve more than this world can ever give you. You are beautiful. You are kind. Most importantly, you are you. Never let anyone tell you how you are supposed to live your life. Never let anyone stop you from finding joy."

Snow (they/them)



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CH-12-Slide-Morgan-Outlaw.jpg> >

"My dream world of accessibility is where everyone, be it any disability or sickness is able to feel valued, included, cared for and have the tools and support to be the selves that they desire and imagine to be."

Sarmistha Talukdar
(they/them)
@tavishi.experiments
Venmo: @Sarmistha-Talukdar

"A world where people can be themselves without being judged or abandoned. People support each other, we have thriving communities where people have the power to decide how to run their own neighborhoods, there is affordable housing, free public transport, universal health care, people don't have to work to the bone to have their needs met because everyone get UBI, and the taxes that people pay on what they earn from their work is used to coordinate across regions focus by that's what those representing them at the local and regional councils. There's free childcare, and other care facilities, education and access to internet. We don't have prisons because people can come together as community to hold those who cause harm accountable and provide support to those who have been harmed. People understand that the mind, body and spirit are all connected and that we are all interdependent and a part of a collective....hence the focus is our interbeing."

Meera Ghani
(she/her)
Twitter: @meeraghani

"I want to be able to go to the river. It is so hard to access nature now that I can't walk far. Walking requires so much of my attention, and I have to go so slowly, and look at my feet while I walk. But even more than that, it's most of the time not even feasible for me to get to a nature path. I want to be able to get so close to the river that I could put my hand in it. I want a path there that a wheelchair could go on. That's my biggest dream – don't force me to be disconnected by building paths I can't travel."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"Celebrating differences rather than being afraid of them. Normalizing variability and biodiversity. Interacting with other species. Group rituals/connecting."

Tai
(they)
@FelineForestMedicine
Venmo: @TaiCK
PayPal: PayPal.me/CranioWithTai
Zelle: 845.915.0798

"Shut down any businesses that aren't accessible. Total shut down of anything and everything that is not accessible for able bodied and able minded folks to rally understand that the world they live in is tailored to only them. Remote work and remote school as ideal options that have a great idea of funding. Dismantling of the restrictions for disability and SSI, regular consistent funds and medical care for anything disabled folks need."

Author wished to remain anonymous

"When designing new buildings and spaces and planning events the first conversation will be "how can we make this accessible to the most marginalized members of our community". Accessibility is a forethought. Sex work is presented as a viable emotional option for disabled and chronically ill people."

Lavender
(They/Them)
Instagram: @therunawaygrunge
Twitter: @runawaygrunge
PayPal: Paypal.me/therunawaygrunge
Wealthsimple Cash: \$runawaygrunge
Cash App: \$runawaygrunge

References

1. Lebrecht, James and Nicole Newnham, dirs. *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*. Higher Ground Productions, Little Punk, Ford Foundation, Just Films, Rusted Spoke Productions, 2020.
2. Mingus, Mia. "You Are Not Entitled To Our Deaths: COVID, Abled Supremacy, & Interdependence," *Leaving Evidence* (blog). January 16, 2022.
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2022/01/16/you-are-not-entitled-to-our-deaths-covid-abled-supremacy-interdependence/> <
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2022/01/16/you-are-not-entitled-to-our-deaths-covid-abled-supremacy-interdependence/> > .
3. Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.
4. SiQ (@sickinquarters), <https://instagram.com/sickinquarters> <
<https://instagram.com/sickinquarters> >, <https://www.sickinquarters.com/> <
<https://www.sickinquarters.com/> > .

Author Information

DISTORIES

DISTORIES is a small open-source and open-access Instagram zine project, gathering testimonies from disabled contributors. The project was stewarded by geunsaeng ahn from September 2021 to July 2022. Sixteen anonymous and named individuals have contributed content to this excerpt. Identities listed in the section just preceding the chapter excerpts are from all sixteen authors' own descriptions of their identities from submissions, as of July 2022. For those authors who did not choose to remain anonymous, readers will find information such as names or monikers, social media handles, and payment platform handles/accounts under each contribution, in each section. Some handles may not currently work, though they were active at the time that contributors shared them with DISTORIES.

[View all of DISTORIES's articles.](#)

Article details

Various contributing authors, "DISTORIES," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.9>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

The Dedication: Leaving Evidence of Life, Death, Care, and Confinement During COVID-19

by Hailee M. Yoshizaki-Gibbons | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic
Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exploded and nursing homes rapidly became overwhelmed with disease, death, and despair. During this time, I learned Sylvia, an old woman with dementia I had befriended, was one of the many old and disabled people confined in nursing homes who did not survive. In this reflective and part personal, part scholarly essay, I leave evidence of and for Sylvia and the nearly 200,000 old and disabled people and care workers who contracted COVID-19 and died within the confines of neoliberal, profit-driven long-term care institutions. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus writes, "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached." Leaving evidence is a political act, a form of resistance in an ableist word. And yet leaving evidence is particularly challenging in the context of dementia, care, confinement, and death—making it even more important, more urgent. Building on Ellen Samuels' assertion, "Crip time is grief time," I consider how mourning Sylvia and countless other nursing home deaths, interwoven with my own experiences of distress, yet also solidified my need to survive, might leave evidence and keep working toward an abolitionist future—one in which old and disabled women like Sylvia, like my future self, might thrive.

KEYWORDS disability, time, care, COVID-19, aging, dementia

In late April of 2020, I wrote the last few words of my dissertation—the dedication: "To Sylvia . . . with whom this project begins and ends."

Sylvia (a pseudonym) is an old woman with dementia I came to care deeply for during my ethnographic research of a dementia unit in Cedarwood Care Center, a nursing home in the Chicagoland area, from 2018–19.¹ She was a kind, caring, affectionate person.

Yet, Sylvia was entirely secluded from the world outside of the nursing home. Her husband, Tom, had died nearly 20 years ago. Sylvia and Tom had three adult children, but they never

visited her.

The care workers whispered rumors that the children had abandoned Sylvia because, even before she developed dementia, she had “severe and persistent mental illness”. Like Sylvia, I have a long-term psychiatric disability. So, Sylvia and I connected, our crip, mad, demented bodyminds becoming deeply intertwined.²

As soon as I finished typing the dedication, I quickly searched Sylvia’s full name on the internet—a compulsive ritual I had developed ever since the pandemic exploded and nursing homes became overwhelmed with disease, despair, and death.

A result pops up. My heart sinks. It is exactly what I feared.

An obituary.

The tears make their way down my face, following familiar pathways. A deep ache forms in my heart. I wish I could have seen Sylvia just one last time. To tell her a final goodbye, to express how much she meant to me. But only “essential” personnel have been permitted in nursing homes for months now, leaving the old and disabled people confined in nursing homes more isolated than ever, as a feeble attempt to suppress the disease that was debilitating and killing the residents and the care workers at alarming rates. Sylvia was not the first old woman with dementia to die, alone, in a nursing home during the COVID-19 pandemic. And she would be far from the last.

In this reflective, part-personal, part-scholarly essay, I leave evidence of and for Sylvia and the over 200,000 old and disabled people and care workers who contracted COVID-19 and died within the confines of neoliberal, profit-driven long-term care institutions.

These narratives are idiosyncratic, nonlinear, and cyclical. They move between my time with Sylvia (2018–2019) and the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic. I mark the latter with dates but not the former. Much like Sylvia’s and my crip, mad, demented bodyminds, and much like my relationship with Sylvia, the vignettes are idiosyncratic. Nonlinear. Cyclical. Like grief, as my therapist likes to remind me, time and time again.

Building on feminist disability studies scholar Ellen Samuels’ assertion, “Crip time is grief time,” I consider how mourning Sylvia’s death and countless other nursing home deaths interweaved with my own experiences of distress, yet also solidified my need to survive, to flourish, to leave evidence.³

What follows is a story that evidences Sylvia’s life through the moments of its interaction with mine. It is a partial and fraught story, but the story of crip, mad, demented bodyminds

is often partial and fraught. Evidencing the complicated, relational, and contentious ways that our stories and lives overlap is essential to capturing crip pandemic life.

Leaving Evidence

What does it mean to leave evidence?

Disability justice activist Mia Mingus writes, "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other."⁴

Leaving evidence is a political act, a form of resistance in an ableist word. Historically, disabled people have been excluded from leaving evidence. The very structure of society renders disability and disabled people invisible and unknowable. We are hidden, segregated, and locked away in our family's homes, special education classrooms, sheltered workshops, nursing homes, psychiatric wards, hospitals, jails, and prisons. We have been subject to exploitation, impoverishment, violence, war, environmental catastrophes, and a neoliberal capitalist political economy—"all of which produce, propagate, and proliferate disability while simultaneously rendering disabled people completely invisible."⁵ Often surviving in isolation, we have had to fight to find one another. As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha notes, "Ableism isolates and keeps disabled, Deaf, neurodivergent people from finding disabled, Deaf, and neurodivergent communities."⁶ This struggle to find one another, to connect across space and time, to celebrate our interdependence is why leaving evidence is so important.

And yet leaving evidence is particularly challenging in the context of dementia, care, confinement, and death. How do we leave evidence for those who are confined? How do we leave evidence for those without any access to the outside world? How do we leave evidence for those who have not survived?

My research at Cedarwood Care Center raises a lot of questions about whether I have a right to tell the stories of Sylvia and other old women with dementia. How do you tell a story like theirs, a story that deserves to be told without "using" Sylvia, her works, her mind, and her body? These are important questions but ones that can only be grappled with alongside the following question: what are the risks of *not* telling their stories?

Disabled and old people are seen as separate, individual, and disconnected from both each other and non-disabled people. These ideas can intensify the ethical questions about speaking for others by creating a sense of heightened vulnerability and obscuring the connections that link their stories and experiences to others. As Alison Kafer observes,

disability is relational; it is “experienced in and through relationships” and “does not occur in isolation.”⁷ As disabled people, we are keenly aware of our interconnectedness, or what Margaret Schildrick and Alyson Patsavas have referred to as “leaky bodies”—in which disability is an “experience that flows through, across, and between always-already connected bodies.”⁸ It is this relationality that I track here. It is this relationality that I hold center as I prioritize questions of assent and presumptions of intentionality with folks deemed “incapable” of either. It is this relationality that shapes my efforts to speak with rather than for.

The deep bond I shared with Sylvia reflects the leakiness of our bodyminds, the ways our joy and our pain and our longing for freedom often melded in a place dominated by carceral, neoliberal, capitalist logics. I cannot leave evidence of my own experience or of Sylvia’s experience, I can only leave evidence of *our* experiences—our togetherness, our intimacy, our shared anguish, hopes, and dreams.

Seeking Connection

I initially encounter Sylvia from afar. It is my first day at Cedarwood Care Center, and the Head Nurse of the Alzheimer’s and Special Care Unit is giving me a tour. Sylvia walks around the dementia unit. The Head Nurse describes her as “wandering” and “unaware.” However, as I observe Sylvia, calmly walking in a purple sweatshirt with a long, beautiful, gray braid, I do not agree with the Head Nurse. Sylvia rubs a cloth hamper in the common area for a minute. She then takes a cup that had been left nearby and holds it against the hamper, as if filling the cup at a water cooler. She rubs the cup up and down the hamper several times and then laughs. “I think we are all out!” She then sets the cup down and walked away. Ableism and ageism precondition a reading of Sylvia’s actions as unintentional, evidence of nothing more than her diagnosis. I understand her action as more purposeful than the Head Nurse believed—I witness someone seeking touch and sound and feedback, trying to meet her needs in a place of deprivation, isolation, and confinement. I feel a connection I cannot yet quite explain.

The Start of the Pandemic

February 29, 2020.

The first confirmed outbreak in the United States is in a nursing home in suburban Seattle, Washington.⁹ I knew it would be.

I reach out to the care workers I developed relationships with at Cedarwood Care Center. "Be careful. Be safe," I beg them. They promise they are being as careful and as safe as they can. "Let me know what I can do," I add. We all knew there was nothing any of us could do, really. That it was only a matter of time.

Free Me, Otter, Otter, Daughter

The next time I come across Sylvia, she is sitting in the lobby, on the sofa facing the aquarium. I attempt to approach her, but a religious leader and doctor walk up before I could.

Doctor: Do you have any pain? Are you tired?

Sylvia: No.

Doctor: You are doing great today!

Rabbi: You have a beautiful daughter. Is she beautiful like you?

(Sylvia blushes and appears pleased but also embarrassed.)

Doctor: What did you have for breakfast?

(Sylvia does not answer.)

Doctor: What religion are you? Do you know who this (gestures to rabbi) is?

(Sylvia does not answer.)

Doctor: You are Jewish!

(Sylvia smiles but still does not respond.)

The doctor and the rabbi walk away, the doctor writing in his notes. I am struck by how much that "conversation" with Sylvia is just between the doctor and the rabbi. I think about the many times I have felt unheard by psychiatrists and therapists, about the ways that, as disabled people, we are often overlooked, ignored, or misunderstood by doctors and others who have power over us.

A few days later, I am finally able to speak with Sylvia for the first time. She is once again sitting on the sofa, in the lobby, but this time by herself. Her elegant long, silver hair is swept up in a bun, and as I approach I notice she is sitting next to a baby doll.

"Hello, Sylvia, my name is Hailee. I am spending time here, at Cedarwood Care Center, to learn more about what it is like. Can I talk to you?"

Sylvia smiled up at me. "Yes!"¹⁰ Additionally, the participants with dementia in this study provided verbal and non-verbal assent. Assent refers to an affirmative agreement to engage with the researcher and participate in research. Assent is used to ensure the ethical participation of people who are not legally permitted to provide informed consent.

Assent was obtained from the individual with dementia at the start of the conversation or interview. I also checked in with the participants at various points to ensure they were still comfortable answering questions or talking. If the resident was restless, agitated, having sudden mood changes, or seemingly disengaged, I recognized this as a revocation of assent and ended the interview or interaction.] I sit down next to her. She then begins talking. "They put me in here. Free me. Otter. Otter. Daughter. Please."

Understanding that Sylvia is asking for freedom, my heart breaks a little. I think about how being institutionalized in a psychiatric ward has always been one of my greatest fears. I think about the many marginalized people in US society denied the basic rights of freedom. I reflect on all the masking, performing, and hiding I have needed to do to avoid being confined—something Sylvia, as an old single woman with dementia, was unable to do. I feel the walls of the dementia unit closing in on me. I see them closed around Sylvia. "I wish I could free you," I tell her, quietly, meekly, feeling helpless and hopeless.

Sylvia pats my hand, comforting me. She then gestures to the baby doll. Almost as if knowing that I needed to talk about something else. "Oh, is that your baby?" I ask. "Yes!" Sylvia responds, once again smiling. "How cute!" I tell her. "What is your baby's name?" I ask. "Sylvia responds, "Freddie Joy Fader. Until someone brings us. Come home. And they'll go away. She has to go, until I go. It was twenty. Twenty." I nod in agreement. "I hope they bring you and Freddie home," I say softly. Sylvia responds, "It's probably more morning. This is the thing that has to be earned. Can I do that without the trip? Is a seagull coming?"

The Epicenter of the Pandemic

I quickly become fixated on, perhaps even obsessed with, the death toll in nursing homes.

March 7, 2020.

The nursing home in suburban Seattle, described as the "epicenter" of the outbreak, reports thirteen residents have died from complications related to COVID-19. Approximately seventy care workers are sick.¹¹

March 14, 2020.

"Trump Administration is Relaxing Oversight of Nursing Homes."¹² The *New York Times* headline, in stark black lettering, overwhelms me. The Trump administration has been pursuing this loosening of regulations, which includes relaxing rules intended to prevent and lessen the spread of infectious disease, since July 2019. I wish I felt surprised it was still being pursued as COVID-19 rapidly spreads. But the Trump administration has never cared about marginalized people's lives. And old and disabled people in nursing homes are out of sight, out of mind. "We have to make sure that our regulations are not so burdensome that they hurt the industry," Seema Verma, an administrator for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services claims. Because a multi-billion-dollar industry must be protected at all costs—even if the cost is old and disabled people's lives. I already know the impact will be worse in for-profit nursing homes, which comprise 70 percent of all nursing homes and are more likely to confine poor Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Helpless, hopeless, I wait for the number of sick and dying people in nursing homes to surge.

March 21, 2020.

As expected, the death toll continues to climb, slowly but surely. Approximately seventy-three nursing homes and other congregate care facilities in twenty-two states now report cases of COVID-19.¹³ The article describes the virus as "the almost perfect killing machine." Now, fifty-five disabled elders have died—one-quarter of all deaths.

Bed, Sun, Horse

When Sylvia has a cognitive evaluation, administered by one of Cedarwood Care Center's social workers, she "failed."¹⁴ She is unable to answer a single question about where she currently lives, what city she is in, what three words the social worker had asked her to remember and regurgitate.¹⁵

Bed. Sun. Horse.

The social worker simply says, "Okay, thanks Sylvia," before proclaiming Sylvia is "gone" and "just kind of stares at you."

Gone. "Alive" yet . . . dead.

All because she can not repeat:

Bed. Sun. Horse.

The social worker asks all the wrong questions, I think. These are questions built on an ableist notion that ties personhood and presence to memory. Sylvia has dementia, in addition to other mental and communication disabilities. Of course, she is unable to answer these types of questions in a way that “made sense” to the social worker.

But Sylvia often makes sense to me.

Is A Seagull Coming?

“Is a seagull coming?” Sylvia’s question after our first interaction echoes in my mind for days. I neatly write it down in my field notes.

This question may seem meaningless—a jumble of words with no significance. Medically, it would be understood as a sign of aphasia, or the loss of the ability to understand or express speech. It would be pointed to as a sign that Sylvia’s dementia was progressing.

Feminist disability studies scholar Margaret Price argues, “The failure to make sense, as measured against and by those with ‘normal’ minds, means a loss of personhood.” These dismissive views deny people like Sylvia rhetoricity, or the ability to be received as a “valid human subject.”¹⁶ As Price explains, rhetoricity refers to the ability to be understood and for one’s communication to be heeded and valued. People with dementia are primarily denied rhetoricity because of bodymind experiences associated with dementia, such as memory loss, disorientation, or aphasia. Consequently, they may not “make sense” to those around them according to dominant “rules” of communication.¹⁷

Leaning on Price’s assertion, I understand Sylvia’s question was asked in the context of what I have termed “dementia time,” a temporal dis/orientation disrupts normative time.¹⁸ In dementia time, individual moments may be self-contained, nonlinear, intermittent, irrational, and idiosyncratic—yet they are no less meaningful or valuable. Rather than demanding that people present linear, coherent, rational narratives, dementia time asks us to consider how a person “makes sense” in that specific moment and context. It invites us to exist together in a world that values authorship, listening, creativity, imagination and flexibility over rigid, linear, logical, rational forms of communication and connection. We may think, communicate, understand, and move through the world differently from one another yet we still exist—together and connected—in this queercrip time and space.

So, if we value Sylvia’s question, if we recognize it as meaningful and engage with it as such: why might have Sylvia inquired whether a seagull is coming after asking to be freed from the confines of the nursing home?¹⁹ Disability studies scholar and rhetorician Elisabeth Miller examined the communication practices of people with aphasia (who did not

have dementia) and found that this form of invention, which relies on close listening, context clues, gestures, and images, was used to cocreate meaning as a form of communicative access. [Elizabeth Miller, "Negotiating Communicative Access in Practice: A Study of a Memoir Group for People with Apraxia," *Written Communication*, 36, no. 2, 197-230.] While I could not ask Sylvia to explain her use of the word seagull in a way that I could fully understand, I cocreated meaning with her by considering the words she used (free me, freedie), how often she used them, where she had chosen to sit (near the exit), and other signifiers. This process allowed me to respect Sylvia's authorship and rhetoricity by understanding her question as purposeful and important.] What does a seagull symbolize?

I spend an afternoon reading about seagulls, their lives, and how their presence has been interpreted by others, naturally, culturally, and spiritually.

I consider what a seagull symbolizes.

Ultimately, I write in my notes, "Freedom. Collectivity. Flourishing. Life." I skip a line and continue, "Messengers of changing tides and changing times."

Alive . . . Yet Dead

Sylvia was viewed as adjacent to death, as in the process of dying, for years. Long before the pandemic. Long before her actual death.

What is death? What does it truly mean to die?

In dominant US culture, people often avoid this question, hiding and shielding themselves from any conversation focused on their vulnerability or waning vitality. They cling tightly to their youthfulness, able-mindedness, and able-bodiedness.

Those marginalized by age, disability, race, gender, class, immigration status, and sexuality often understand that death is always possible, always close in a world that does not value us. And the pandemic made it even harder to circumvent death. Death is constant and unrelenting.

Legally and medically, death is defined as, "irreversible cessation of cardiorespiratory function or irreversible cessation of all brain function."²⁰ Western culture generally accepts this view—but with a particular focus on "brain death" as a marker of loss of life, given the broad acceptance of mind-body dualism and the ideas that consciousness, thought, and "the self" are key aspects of life that reside in the brain. But if we understand death as the

ending of brain function, what does that mean for old people with dementia, who are constructed as “losing” their minds?

Bed. Sun. Horse.

Gone. “Alive” yet . . . dead.

Colloquial healthcare discourse describes dementia as a “brain robbing” or “brain rotting” illness.²¹ Consequently, within popular culture, people use metaphors for dementia such as “the long goodbye” and “the everlasting funeral.”²² Medical experts and social workers often tell caregivers to expect “anticipatory grief,” which refers to grieving the death or loss of the person with dementia before their actual deaths.²³ These medical and cultural references and practices reflect the belief that those with dementia, as they increasingly struggle to meet the norms of memory, communication, orientation, and rationality, are “lost,” “gone,” or even “dead” long before meeting the legal and medical definitions of death. Susan Behuniak notes that the metaphor of old people with dementia as “the living dead” is pervasive and a key aspect of dehumanization.²⁴

Thus, it is endemic in US culture to view old people with dementia as constantly dying or already dead—as people who are slipping away, becoming shells of their former selves. Scientists and medical experts have labeled COVID-19 as endemic too, and this construction of old people with dementia creates a cultural belief that their deaths—COVID-19 related or not—are inevitable, tolerable, perhaps even merciful.

Are we becoming too comfortable, too desensitized to death? Or is it that the deaths of “the living dead,” those who are old, disabled, “demented,” do not matter?

Time to Care

April 17, 2020.

At least 7,000 dead. “They’re death pits,” I read in a *New York Times* article.²⁵ Haven’t they always been? Nursing homes—where old disabled people go to die. Maybe that’s why no one cares.

I feel isolated, afraid, distressed. I sleep late. I cry about Sylvia. I cry about the many other old people with dementia I befriended. Alice. Margaret. Lucille. Fauna. Bernard. Isabelle. Sophea. Betty. Bernice. Herbert. Ramona. Tala. Eleanor. Marlene. Harry.²⁶ I cry about all those who are dying in nursing homes, prisons, immigration detention centers.

I cannot bring myself to search for the others’ names. I cannot handle all this death.

Time warps. Each day feels like a decade, yet the days simultaneously pass quickly.

I continue to keep close watch of the death toll in nursing homes. Depending on the day, context, and news outlet, nursing home deaths account for 25–70 percent of all deaths.²⁷ The numbers typically include both old and disabled people and care workers, many of whom are marginalized by race, gender, class, and immigration status. Outbreaks in spaces of confinement adjacent to nursing homes, such as jails, prisons, and immigration detention centers, which predominantly incarcerate poor, disabled, BIPOC also increase rapidly.

Still, nothing is done. These are the people our society has disregarded, locked up, thrown away, dehumanized.

I dream about a disability justice, abolitionist approach to care, about eradicating institutionalization, about freedom, collectivity, flourishing, life. Is a seagull coming?

Our Disabled Elders and Ancestors

For disabled people, elderhood is often elusive. Many of us do not make it to elderhood. It is assumed that we do not survive because of our illnesses and impairments, our weakened immune systems, or progressive disabilities. At times, that is true. But many of us also die due to racist, ableist, and ageist structures such as medical neglect, for-profit healthcare, violence, and institutionalization. Some of us die from overdoses and self-medicating and suicide. Disabled people die in “systems that don’t see their lives as worth living and fighting for.”²⁸ Consequently, being an elder in crip, disabled, mad communities, particularly queer, trans, and BIPOC communities, is rare.

As Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha posits in a conversation with Stacey Milbern, “I both do and do not have disabled QTBIPOC elders in my life. Ancestors, yes. Elders not as much. Elderhood is not a state that just happens. Disabled QTBIPOC elderhood is dependent on systems that support it being there.”²⁹

Our current neoliberal, capitalist structures of care do not support elderhood for millions of old and disabled people, especially those with dementia.³⁰ Nursing homes isolate, exploit, and dehumanize. They extract value from old and disabled people and care workers, resulting in huge profits for the nursing home industry. These spaces of confinement, which purport to care for people, are yet another form of state-sponsored violence and death.

As a community, when we examine our disability or crip lineages, when we look to and for those who came before us, we come to understand that many of our elders have become

ancestors. Stacey Milbern explains, “People sometimes assume ancestorship is reserved for those of biological relation, but a queered or crippled understanding of ancestorship holds that . . . our deepest relationships are with the people we choose to be connected to and honor day after day. Ancestorship, like love, is expansive.”³¹ Crip ancestorship is a way of holding on to those who came before us. We continue to learn from and create knowledge with our ancestors, demand change building on the work of our ancestors, and fantasize about the radically different world we could create, the world our ancestors want for us.

As feminist disability studies scholar Akemi Nishida notes, we must dream and imagine radical futures in which care is outside of state control, surveillance, and violence, and is instead a site of connection, a messy yet collective process, a marker of our interdependence.³²

As we dream and imagine, we need to ensure that old and disabled people in spaces of confinement are included in these futures.

Once when I was sitting with Sylvia in a common area of Cedarwood Care Center, she suddenly stood and announced, “I want to go.” “I know, I’m sorry,” I say. “That’s all I have,” she replies. “I know.” She continues, “Maybe I shouldn’t say anything but if you had some good things, things good. I only have some good trades, makes, grades. Let’s go! Just let me go. Because I got to go. I just have to get out. To that.” She points to the window, to the blue sky and the shining sun.

Institutionalized old disabled people—many of whom are negatively gendered, racialized, and classed—are our elders. They are dreaming of a different world for themselves, for us. But they are also dying. And they are holding these dreams for us as they transition to the ancestral plane. As Stacey Milbern reflected, “My ancestors are disabled people who lived looking out of institution windows wanting so much more for themselves.”³³

Sylvia was once my disabled elder. Now she is my ancestor. This transition marks the continuation and expansion of our story, not the end.

As queer feminist author and disability studies scholar Jennifer Natalya Fink claims, “Our disability lineages can only be reclaimed through the stories we uncover.”³⁴ This is why we must leave evidence.

Time to Grieve

Because of the pandemic, Sylvia’s graveside service is private. I hold my own, personal memorial in my bedroom. I light a candle, and I listen to a recording I took on the very last

day of my research—a recording I have not listened to since then.

The recording is evidence of my goodbye to Sylvia. I still cannot articulate exactly why I decided to record it. I think it was because I lost my dad in the middle of my fieldwork. My dad had been placed in hospice before he died, which had provided me with time to reflect on our complicated relationship and think about how I wanted to say goodbye to him. After his death, I continued to think about goodbyes—what they mean and how often in our society we deflect and avoid them. So, when it is time to say goodbye to Sylvia at the end of my fieldwork, I approach it intentionally and want it memorialized in some way—as a special and significant moment in time.

While writing this piece, I fulfilled a promise I had made, to myself, to Sylvia a long time ago. A promise I previously could not bring myself to honor. I needed time.

“Crip time is grief time,” Samuels writes.

I visit Sylvia’s grave. I play the recording for her, and I weep.

Hailee: Sylvia, I’m going to miss you.

Sylvia: Yes.

Hailee: I’m going to miss you a lot.

Sylvia: Oh, me too!

Hailee: I love you.

Sylvia: I do too. [A huge smile spreads over Sylvia’s face.]

Hailee: I like your big smile.

[Sylvia laughs and presents her cheek for me to kiss, and I oblige.]

Sylvia: That’s good, that’s one. I was glad!

The Dedication

To Sylvia . . . with whom this project begins and ends.

“We must leave evidence.” Mia Mingus’ words reverberate through my bodymind.³⁵

As an ethnographer, my time in the nursing home was intended to be centered on “collecting” evidence, not “leaving” evidence. Collecting is about gathering, about taking. It

reflects the colonial, white supremacist, and ableist roots of research. Leaving is about giving, rejecting invisibility and disposability, elevating our stories. Reflecting on Mingus' call to leave evidence, Adriana van Altvorst asserts, "Our stories of survival expose us and unite us."³⁶

As an old woman with dementia, confined in an institution during a pandemic, Sylvia was meant to not survive. As the care workers once told me, "For most people, death is the only way to leave this place."

But the stories of Sylvia and the hundreds of thousands of old disabled people who died in nursing homes—many of whom were further marginalized by gender, race, and class—survive through us. As Alice Wong observes, "[Our stories are] something that we're going to pass on to other people when we're nothing but dust."³⁷ Those who have died in nursing homes since the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic were once our disabled elders. Now they are our ancestors.

Sylvia talked and laughed often. She walked the entire unit and would sometimes find objects that seemed to create pleasant surprises, like an uneaten cookie left on a tray or a hairbrush on a couch. She sang enthusiastically, especially the song "My Bonnie." She was physically affectionate, holding hands and hugging others. I frequently witnessed her comforting those around her when they appeared distressed. She complemented those around her, often telling the care workers and other people with dementia in the nursing home that they were beautiful and wonderful. She was very fashionable. She often experienced her husband, Tom, as being in the room with her—announcing, "Tom's right there!" while smiling and laughing. Sylvia would sometimes ask to look at my "book" (my field notes). She would flip through the notebook and make encouraging comments like, "Fabulous!" or "How precious!" She spoke, moved, and communicated in ways that made it clear how much she longed to be free, to go home. This is how Sylvia lived.

This is why we must leave evidence.

Changing Times and Changing Tides

As of February 2022, the Centers for Disease Control reported that more than 201,000 old and disabled people and care workers in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities have died since the beginning of the pandemic.³⁸ That number continues to climb, with tens to hundreds of nursing home residents continuing to die of COVID-19 each week, especially during cold weather peaks ³⁹Footnote: The statistic of 201,000 COVID-19 related deaths of long-term care residents and care workers is likely a significant undercount due to a number of factors. First, resident and care worker deaths were not

tracked prior to June 2020. Second, state reporting was inconsistent and some states did not report deaths for long-term care facilities other than nursing homes (e.g., assisted living facilities, group homes). Third, long-term care facilities other than nursing homes were not tracked after June 30, 2021. These issues have prevented the Kaiser Family Foundation and similar entities from providing updated data that includes all residential long-term care facilities. The most up to date data is only inclusive of nursing homes. The AARP reports resident and care worker deaths in nursing homes at 180,000 as of May 2023. As noted by the AARP, inconsistent data tracking throughout the pandemic has hindered efforts to fully understand the crisis in long-term care facilities and to address it.

40

201,000. This is 16 percent, or 1 in 6, of all COVID-related deaths in the U.S.

For so long, many of us have just been trying to survive. Many of us in institutions, like Sylvia, did not.

This is why we must leave evidence.

Is a seagull coming?

I am dreaming of an abolitionist future. A future defined by freedom, collectivity, flourishing, and life. A future in which multiply-marginalized disabled and old people might not only survive but thrive.

I am leaving evidence. And I am dreaming of changing times and changing tides—of a different world. For those still confined. For my future self. For us.

Notes

1. All names of people and places are pseudonyms. ↩
2. I acknowledge that “demented” is a loaded term and readers may pause at it. The majority of people with dementia have rejected it. Yet, I use “demented” here as a political category, similar to crip, mad, and queer. These are reappropriated and reclaimed terms to signal empowerment, politicization, and interconnectedness, even as many disabled, psychiatrically diagnosed, and LGBTQIA+ folks, respectively, may not use such terms. I am interested in exploring demented as a radical coalitional term that more directly and broadly applies to people with diverse mental disabilities. Demented, as a label, refers to people socially constructed as “crazy,” mad, behaving wildly or irrationally.” Demented more clearly fits into crip politics, rejects diagnostic language (which is an important project of feminist disability studies), and attempts to reclaim a term that has been used to dehumanize those of us labeled as “out of our minds.” As Floyd Skloot, a writer and activist with dementia who seeks to challenge the way we understand what it means to be “demented,” noted: “When demented breaks down into ‘de’ for ‘out of’ and ‘ment’ for mind—literally ‘out of my mind’—I interpret the verbal construction as having positive connotations. Not looney, but liberated. Forced out of my mind, forced away from my customary cerebral mode of encounter, I find myself dwelling in wilder realms of sense and emotion” {Floyd Skloot, *In the Shadow of Memory* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 2003), 21–22}. I am not using demented to describe Sylvia but rather applying the term to describe Sylvia and my bodymind connections and relationality. ↩

3. Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017). ↵
4. Mia Mingus, "About," Leaving Evidence, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2/>> . ↵
5. Nirmala Erevelles, "Thinking with Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2014), paragraph 7. ↵
6. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022) 24. ↵
7. Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 8. ↵
8. Alyson Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 8, no. 2 (2014): 213. ↵
9. Mike Baker, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Karen Weise, "Washington State Declares Emergency Amid Coronavirus Death and Illnesses at Nursing Home," *New York Times*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/us/coronavirus-washington-death.html> < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/us/coronavirus-washington-death.html>> . ↵
10. I engaged in multiple strategies to ensure this research project was ethical. The research was approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board and by the Cedarwood Care Center administration. Written consent for the participants with dementia was obtained through each individual's Legally Authorized Representative. Murphy et al. emphasized that legal proxies should be used to include (rather than exclude) people with advanced dementia in research. [Kathy Murphy, Jordan Fionnuala, Andrew Hunter, Adeline Cooney, and Dymrna Casey, "Articulating the Strategies for Maximising the Inclusion of People with Dementia in Qualitative Research Studies," *Dementia*, 14, no. 6 (2015): 800-824. ↵
11. Mike Baker, "Nursing Home Hit by Coronavirus Says 70 Workers Are Sick," *New York Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/coronavirus-nursing-home.html> < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/us/coronavirus-nursing-home.html>> . ↵
12. Jesse Drucker and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, "Trump Administration Is Relaxing Oversight of Nursing Homes," *New York Times*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/business/trump-administration-nursing-homes.html> < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/business/trump-administration-nursing-homes.html>> . ↵
13. Peter Whoriskey, Maria Sacchetti, and Richard A. Webster, "Coronavirus Cases Surge at Nursing Homes as Workers Battle 'Almost Perfect Killing Machine,'" *New York Times*, March 21, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/21/nursing-home-coronavirus-deaths/> < <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/21/nursing-home-coronavirus-deaths/>> . ↵
14. This evaluation was done in a common area of Cedarwood Care Center, as I was sitting next to Sylvia. I was given assent by Sylvia to continue sitting with her during the evaluation and I was given assent by the social worker to observe and record the evaluation for the purposes of my research. ↵
15. To be clear, I do not agree with the social worker's assessment that Sylvia "failed." Rather, I am critiquing the premise and structure of the test and how it actually creates conditions for failure because it is based on dominant, ableist norms of thinking and communication. ↵
16. Margaret Price. *Mad at School* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 26–27. ↵
17. Hailee Yoshizaki-Gibbons, "Time and Aging: Old Women and Care Workers Navigating Time, Relationality, and Power in Dementia Units," PhD diss. (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2020). ↵
18. Yoshizaki-Gibbons, "Time and Aging." ↵
19. One of the communicative practices used when connecting in dementia time is "distributed invention." Rhetoricians Kara Alexander and Danielle Williams define it as "a process of thinking that involves two or more people engaging in brainstorming, problem-solving, and idea-generating activities where original ideas become mutually appropriated and evolve into

- something different altogether." [Kara Poe Alexander and Danielle M. Williams, "DMAC After Dark: Toward a Theory of Distributed Invention," *Computers and Composition*, 36 (2015), 33. ↵
20. Brendan Parent and Angela Turi, "Death's Troubled Relationship with the Law," *AMA Journal of Ethics* 22, no. 12 (2020): E1055–1061. ↵
 21. Emma Nichols and Annie Chan, "Memory Robber—Keeping Dementia from Stealing Our Future," *Think Global Health*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/memory-robber-keeping-dementia-stealing-our-future> < <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/memory-robber-keeping-dementia-stealing-our-future>> . ↵
 22. Fawn Germer, "Why They Call Alzheimer's 'The Long Goodbye,'" *Huffpost*, June 12, 2010, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-they-call-alzheimers_b_533186 < https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-they-call-alzheimers_b_533186> . ↵
 23. Deanna Upchurch, "Grieving Before a Death: Anticipatory Grief and Dementia Caregivers," *Hope Health*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.hopehealthco.org/blog/grieving-before-a-death-anticipatory-grief-and-dementia-caregivers/> < <https://www.hopehealthco.org/blog/grieving-before-a-death-anticipatory-grief-and-dementia-caregivers/>> . ↵
 24. Susan Behuniak, "The Living Dead? The Construction of People with Alzheimer's Disease as Zombies," *Ageing & Society* 31, no. 1 (2011): 70–92. ↵
 25. Farah Stockman et al., "'They're Death Pits': Virus Claims at Least 7,000 Lives in U.S. Nursing Homes," *New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/coronavirus-nursing-homes.html> < <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/coronavirus-nursing-homes.html>> . ↵
 26. As previously mentioned, all names are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. ↵
 27. Articles often focused on different locales, states, or regions. Some focused on the United States on a national level. See Dylan Matthews, "America's COVID-19 Hot Spots Shed a Light on Our Moral Failures," *Vox*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/5/1/21239396/covid-19-meatpacking-prison-jail-moral> < <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/5/1/21239396/covid-19-meatpacking-prison-jail-moral>> ; Elaine Godfrey, "'We're Literally Killing Elders Now,'" *The Atlantic*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-especially-deadly-nursing-homes/610855/> < <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-especially-deadly-nursing-homes/610855/>> . ↵
 28. Leah Lakshmi Piepzana-Samarasinha, *The Future is Disabled* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 137. ↵
 29. Leah Lakshmi Piepzana-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 240–256. ↵
 30. Yoshizaki-Gibbons, "Time and Aging." ↵
 31. Stacey Milbern, "On the Ancestral Plan: Crip Hand Me Downs and the Legacy of Our Movements," *Disability Visibility Project* (Blog), March 10, 2019, <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2019/03/10/on-the-ancestral-plane-crip-hand-me-downs-and-the-legacy-of-our-movements/> < <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2019/03/10/on-the-ancestral-plane-crip-hand-me-downs-and-the-legacy-of-our-movements/>> . ↵
 32. Akemi Nishida, *Just Care: Messy Entanglements of Disability, Dependency, and Desire* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2022). ↵
 33. Milbern, "On the Ancestral Plan." ↵
 34. Jennifer Natalya Fink, "We Should Claim Our Disabled Ancestors with Pride," *New York Times*, February 27, 2022. ↵
 35. Mingus, "About." ↵

36. Adriana van Altvorst, "Mia Mingus ~ Leaving Evidence," *Trauma Responsive New Zealand*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.pacesconnection.com/g/Trauma-responsive-New-Zealand/blog/mia-mingus-leaving-evidence> < <https://www.pacesconnection.com/g/Trauma-responsive-New-Zealand/blog/mia-mingus-leaving-evidence> > . ↵
37. Disability Visibility Project, "Mia Mingus on Leaving Evidence of Disabled Lives," February 28, 2016, MPEG-4, 3:29, <https://soundcloud.com/alice-wong-60/mia-mingus-on-leaving-evidence-of-disabled-lives> < <https://soundcloud.com/alice-wong-60/mia-mingus-on-leaving-evidence-of-disabled-lives> > . ↵
38. Priya Chidambaram, "Over 200,000 Residents and Staff in Long-Term Care Facilities Have Died from COVID-19," *Kaiser Family Foundation*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/over-200000-residents-and-staff-in-long-term-care-facilities-have-died-from-covid-19/> < <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/over-200000-residents-and-staff-in-long-term-care-facilities-have-died-from-covid-19/> > . ↵
39. AARP. "Winter brings increased COVID-19 Deaths in Nursing Homes Once Again, Analysis Finds," February 16, 2023, <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/health/info-2023/nursing-home-covid-19-report-february.html> < <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/health/info-2023/nursing-home-covid-19-report-february.html> > . ↵
40. Public Policy Institute. "AARP Nursing Home COVID-19 Dashboard," May 18, 2023, <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/issues/caregiving/info-2020/nursing-home-covid-dashboard.html?cmp=RDRCT-350d888f-20201013> < <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/issues/caregiving/info-2020/nursing-home-covid-dashboard.html?cmp=RDRCT-350d888f-20201013> > . ↵

Author Information



Hailee M. Yoshizaki-Gibbons

Hailee Yoshizaki-Gibbons is an Assistant Professor in Biomedical Humanities at Hiram College. She received her PhD in Disability Studies with a Concentration in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research employs an intersectional lens to examine the ways gender, race, class, and immigration status mediate the lives of old and disabled people and those who care for them. Her current project analyzes how temporality influences the care relationships between old women with dementia and the immigrant women of color employed to care for them in dementia units of nursing homes.

[View all of Hailee M. Yoshizaki-Gibbons's articles.](#)

Article details

Hailee M. Yoshizaki-Gibbons, "The Dedication: Leaving Evidence of Life, Death, Care, and Confinement during COVID-19," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.10>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Only Together, We Flourish: The Importance of Friendship and Care in Navigating Anti-Asian Hate and Shielding During COVID-19

by Sophie Savage and Denise Wong | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic and the response of the government of the United Kingdom have exacerbated deep-seated inequalities. People of color and disabled people have been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic. This essay has two authors, Sophie, a white disabled academic from England, and Denise, an Asian music therapist from Hong Kong; we are friends who live in Bristol. By examining our understanding of the pandemic through our lived experiences and identities, we provide transparency for engaging with our individual and shared perspectives. We use Mia Mingus's concept of access intimacy to characterize our friendship as one which prioritizes accessibility and a deep understanding of each other's realities whilst respecting and learning from our differences. We explore the idea of vulnerability and what it means to be made vulnerable during COVID, as well as the notion of ungrievability. Through engaging the concept of embodied belonging we address care as a necessity in response to all the ways in which this pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated vulnerability, ungrievability, and challenges to finding a sense of belonging. We demonstrate solidarity, empathy, joy, love, respect, and a deep reverence for each other and our journeys through hostile environments, providing a counterpoint to the neoliberal structures of oppression as we find ways to live, create, and flourish.

KEYWORDS racism, disability, solidarity, race, pandemic, COVID-19, ableism, anti-Asian hate

Essay Map

1. Glossary

Vulnerability

Ungrievability

Embodied Belonging

Access Intimacy

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV)

Shielding

2. Introduction

2a. Denise

2b. Sophie

2c. Together

3. Navigating the Pandemic

3a. Sophie

3b. Denise

4. Together We Flourish

4a. Tea, Okonomiyaki, and More Birthday Cake

4b. Where People Flourish: our call for growing caring networks!

5. Concluding Thoughts

6. Acknowledgements

Legend

The purpose of the essay map is to provide guidance for the layout of this essay. The structure of the essay is outlined above. We created a glossary to provide readers with our understanding and use of frequent terminology. This is a feature added for reader accessibility.

When we draw directly from our experiences, we provide a subheading to indicate whose experience is being shared.

A note on wording: within this essay, the “COVID-19 pandemic” will be addressed as “the pandemic” unless otherwise noted. We do not use the term “BIPOC” (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), which is commonly used in the United States. As this essay emerges from the UK context, we use the term “People of Color” or “POC.” One of the commonly used terms for POC in the UK is “BAME” (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic); however, we do not use this term. From Denise’s experience as a British East Asian person, the “Asian” within BAME is often equated with Asians who are not “yellow,” and the term has, therefore, not been representative of her experience, particularly within the pandemic.¹

We originally wrote the first version of this essay in late 2021, and much has changed since then. However, we do not reflect on these changes, as the essay’s intent is to capture our experience at that time and the process of publication has been extended due to further challenges we have both faced.

1. Glossary

Vulnerability

Political theorists and gender studies scholars looking at grief and COVID-19, Zuzana Maďarová, Pavol Hardoš, and Alexandra Ostertágová explain that some lives are made

more vulnerable and at risk under capitalism, which exacerbates pervasive inequalities and oppressions.² We use this understanding as a starting point to explore our own experiences of vulnerability during the pandemic.

Ungrievability

If someone's life is grievable, all possible measures are taken to preserve, honor, and respect such a life, and there is the acknowledgement of loss; ungrievable lives are not considered by those in power, which, as Mađárová, Hardoš, and Ostertágová discuss, is reflected in wider society.³ We felt that the ways in which those in power made decisions that lead to the preventable deaths of POC and disabled people were well encapsulated by this concept.

Embodied Belonging

We view embodied belonging as resilience. Medical anthropologists Mattes and Lang offer that finding or creating spaces and cultivating the feeling of agency and autonomy for ourselves and our bodies is a radical and often necessary act when navigating hostile environments.⁴

Access Intimacy

Disability justice activist Mia Mingus coined the term access intimacy and described it as: "knowing that someone else is with me in this mess."⁵ This quote from Mia Mingus' essay stood out to us both as it resonated with how we understand our friendship. We are together in navigating life's challenges in a world that is often inaccessible.⁶

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV)

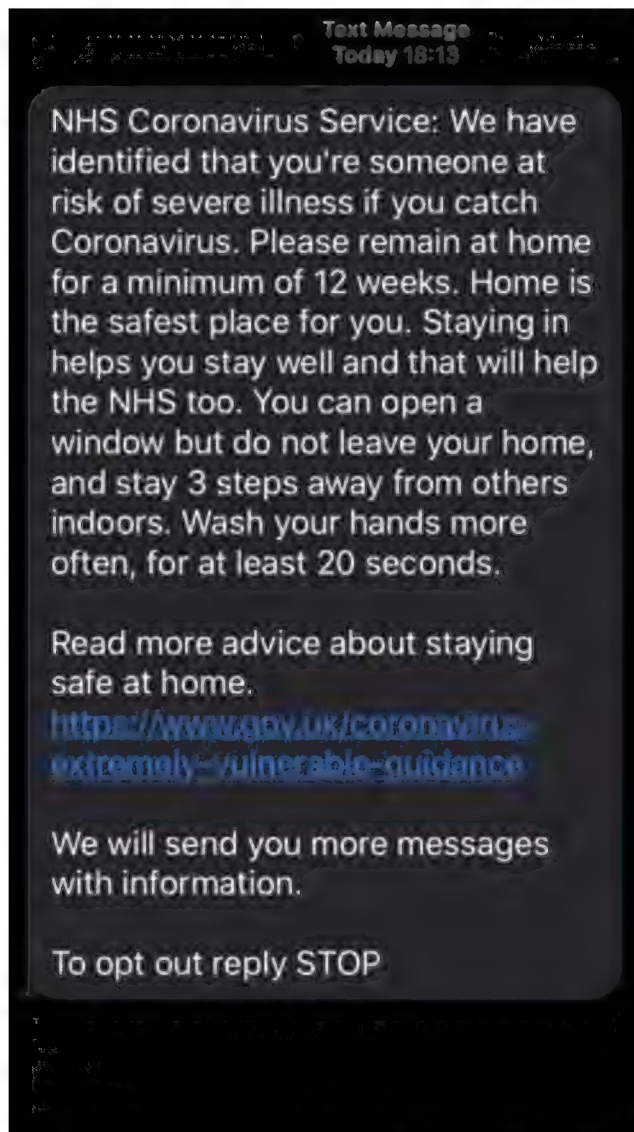
The CEV group was a term coined by the UK government during the pandemic to describe those with reduced immune systems, for example, due to organ transplants, or those with specific cancers or severe respiratory conditions.⁷ We use this term as Sophie was labelled as such.

Shielding

The UK Shielding program directed CEV people, like Sophie, to follow strict guidance regarding their behaviours, for example:⁸

- Do not leave your home

- Do not attend any gatherings
- Do not go out for shopping, leisure or travel
- Keep in touch using remote technology
- Regularly wash your hands with soap and water
- Regular medication must be delivered
- Healthcare appointments will be provided by phone, email, or online
- Planned hospital appointments will be cancelled or postponed



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-1-You-can-open-a-window-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 1. An example of one of the many regular text messages Sophie received from the UK government whilst shielding. Image by Sophie Savage, 2020.

2. Introduction

This essay has two authors, Denise and Sophie, both belonging to communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Denise is from Hong Kong (HK) with chronic eczema and experience of the 2003 SARS pandemic.⁹ Sophie is from England and was classified as CEV due to being immunosuppressed following a liver transplant. We first met when Sophie gave a lecture to music therapy students about Disabled Children's Childhood Studies.¹⁰ Later and through mutual friends, Denise arrived at Sophie's thirtieth birthday party, where our conversation on identity and belonging began; we have been close friends ever since. Our homes are in Bristol in the Southwest of England.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-2-Sophies-30th-Birthday-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 2. Sophie's thirtieth birthday, where it all began. Photo courtesy of Jan Phillips, 2018.

The UK government approached the pandemic by continually prioritising the economy over safety, heralding the importance of individual choice over collective safety. This led to increased anxiety for us both, making it difficult to navigate public spaces.¹¹ For Sophie, this has meant continual isolation and a lack of trust in the state; for Denise, this has meant a continual threat to safety and further reinforcing a sense of non-belonging. Within this neoliberal undercurrent of a lack of care, some have marched for the right to not wear a mask or engage with the vaccine programme,¹² but some of us are marching, or are not able to march, for our rights to life.¹³



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-3-Fuck-White-Supremacy-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg>

Figure 3. Denise also participated in Bristol's Black Lives Matter protest in June, 2020. Photo courtesy of Asa Doktor.

This work began as a paper presentation for the 2021 Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society online conference. The suggested conference themes, in particular, “working through COVID-19,” “ableism and the lack of recognizing a ‘non-able’ body,” and “migration and traumatic political reenactment,” resonated with our shared and individual experience of the pandemic. This early version began to explore some of the concepts mentioned in this essay, however, it felt important to expand and deepen our understanding. When we received the call for papers for this special section, it felt like an important opportunity to craft our narratives and contribute to a vibrant tapestry of crip experiences of the pandemic.

In this essay, we discuss vulnerability, ungrievability, and embodied belonging in relation to our experiences.¹⁴ By exploring the ways in which we are made vulnerable and ungrievable through systematic oppression and a pervasive sense of non-belonging, we use the concept of access intimacy to discuss our resistance and to demonstrate how we have navigated and understood the pandemic together.¹⁵ Advocating for the importance of friendship and prioritising time for practising care is at the core of our message.

Drawing on our lived experiences of ableism and racism, we reflect on internal and external processes of othering. We acknowledge our privilege of being able to stay safely in our homes, access our strong networks of care, and write this essay together. The experiences we share are painful and difficult. Being close friends, we spoke openly and honestly as we wrote, mining deep and ongoing trauma, and processing it together.

2a. Denise

My skin, and the reactions to and of my skin, are the focus of my narrative. Living with chronic eczema and being an East-Asian woman in the UK have shaped the ways I navigate life here. Drawing on my experience of eczema, I was motivated to study psychology and chose to migrate to the UK a decade ago. However, transitioning from being an ethnic majority in HK to navigating what it means to be a minority in the UK was a difficult process.

When COVID-19 became widespread in the UK, my memories of living through the 2003 SARS pandemic as a child resurfaced, leading to re-traumatisation.¹⁶ I remember the militant approach to wearing masks, daily temperature checks, and the overwhelming smell of bleach over surfaces which attacked my nose, even through the mask. The bleach imprinted a strong sensory impression and shaped my understanding of the severity of the virus.

At the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, I initially experienced a freeze response as I was unable to fight or flee.¹⁷ On top of wearing a mask, I wore cotton

gloves because of my eczema. I consistently found myself facing racial discrimination and microaggressions in the UK because I am Asian. As the pandemic unfolded, this feeling of otherness increased. Countries in the West mocked Asians for wearing masks. Advice from the World Health Organisation described wearing face-coverings as a “cultural practice” and not scientifically proven, which was echoed by the university where I was enrolled.¹⁸

2b. Sophie

Exclusion forms the focus of my narrative, as my immune system struggles with daily life. I was born with liver disease and had a transplant as a child, meaning I was often unwell, necessitating long hospital stays. Acute illness led to periods of clinical isolation in hospital, where medical staff would only enter infrequently to take observations and provide medication or food. I have always loved learning, and I found refuge in the hospital’s schoolroom among my diverse peers navigating their own health challenges. At school, however, I was relentlessly bullied; my low attendance, appearance, and daily life were unrelatable. I had thin limbs, a swollen abdomen, and jaundiced skin; I fitted the role of “alien” whilst being alienated. The children’s liver ward felt like a place of belonging, but to belong in an institution of chronically ill and dying children with a frequent bed turnover did not bode well for establishing friendships.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-4-Insider-Outsider-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 4. Taken out of the window, this image captures the view from the outside looking in. Photo by Sophie Savage, 2020.

This mode of being inside and outside of collective experience is familiar. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was included in the national shielding programme.

Shielding differs from clinical isolation; I was not unwell and my body thrives without the daily assault on my immune system. For the first time in my life, I managed over two years without an inpatient hospital admission. Observing the growing numbers of those ill and dying through the media echoed my childhood, surrounded by children fighting for their lives.

The reality for many disabled people and shielders was remarkably different to others navigating the pandemic. I noticed some people's choices correlated to those becoming unwell and dying, as they boasted on social media that they were "just getting on with their lives." Few acknowledged or connected with my reality. With the growing threat to my life, I struggled with understanding those choices. I was becoming less easy to understand and understanding less.

2c. Together

We needed each other's support to undertake this work, mirroring our need for each other throughout the pandemic. We argue that the intersectional and empathetic connection between us both represents the importance of care, empathy, and love needed to thrive during the pandemic. We demonstrate a deep reverence for each other and our trek through hostile environments, providing a counterpoint to the neoliberal structures of oppression as we find ways to live, create, and flourish.

3. Navigating the Pandemic

Together, we created our own robust support network, as we cared for and were simultaneously supported by our new chosen family here in Bristol. Our friendship is one which practices the ethos of access intimacy with continual communication, covering all realms of caregiving, working against systems of oppression, supporting each other's professional careers, and collaborating creatively on shared projects such as the co-production of this essay.¹⁹ With access intimacy, friendship can unfold through speaking in shorthand and sharing knowing looks, which can transcend the exhausting process of trying to make yourself understood, heard, and acknowledged. We feel that the way access intimacy is perceived externally disrupts societal expectations of friendship. As we consider our relationship, we believe that friendships need to generally be held in higher regard. What we can communicate in a look could take an essay to explain, as we are demonstrating here.

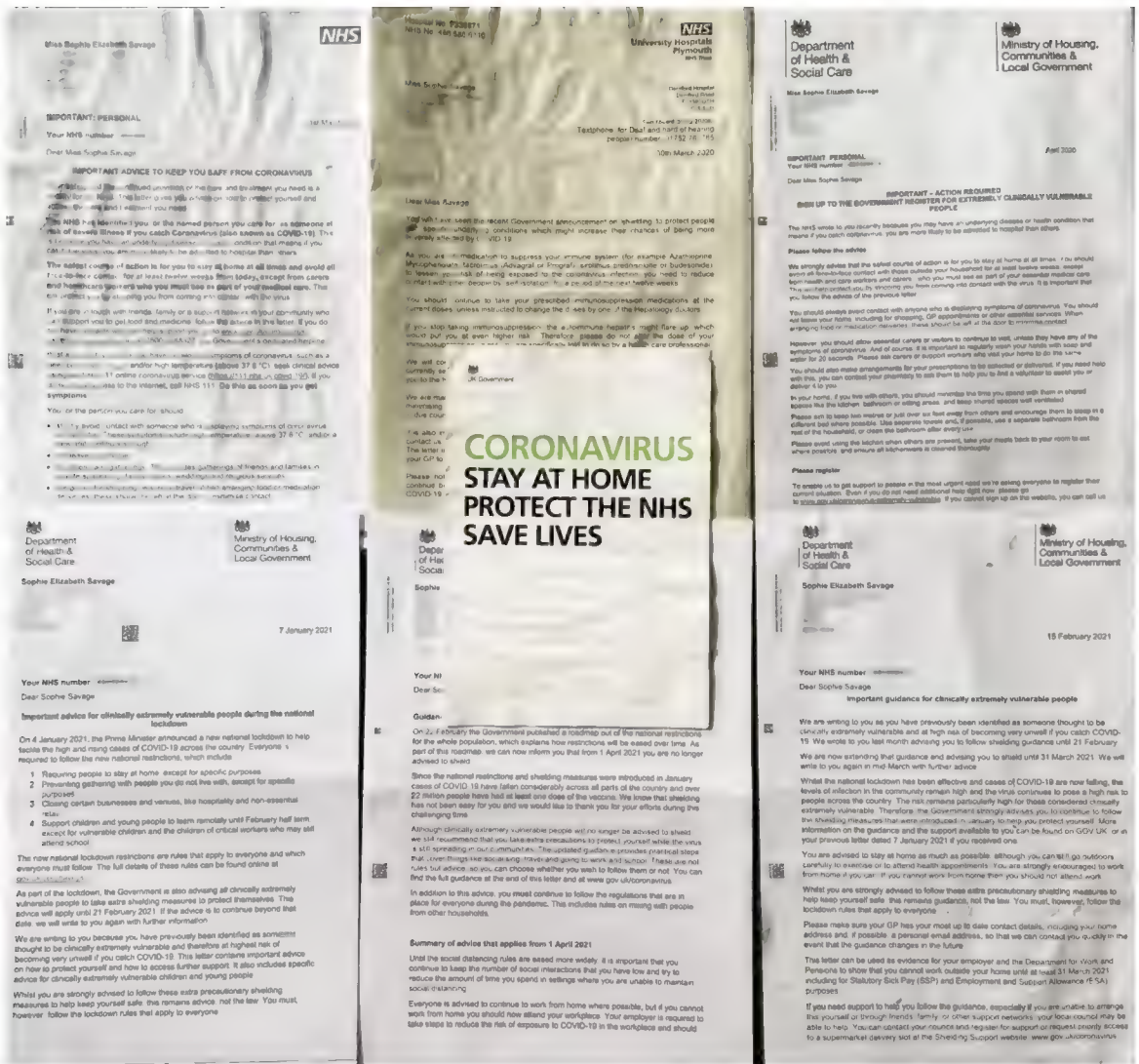
We already understand each other in a deep way, so we often start our conversations at a more advanced level. Fuck the small talk, how's your sense of self in the face of

hatred or potential death is where we started. This is not specific to the pandemic. We have always been this way since Denise arrived at Sophie's party and began to unpack Denise's identity crisis over birthday cake.

3a. Sophie

As an immunosuppressed person who has had a liver transplant, I have always had a complicated sense of embodiment and belonging, one which is shared among other transplant recipients, as my body is a container for another's organ that is always "other."²⁰ Both theoretically and biomedically, transplanted organs cannot assimilate to become "self" material, as the donor's DNA remains.²¹ For me, any distinct boundaries between the self and other within my body have been permanently permeated and the clear distinctions of life and death have been subsumed. The non-self material I hold inside my body brings the possibility of survival for us both, but it also represents an immunological conflict, as my immune system battles the non-self organ, bringing the potential of a more lasting death for us both. Transplantation provides a permanent opening for housing difference, arguing for the concept of an intercorporality or hybridity. When post-human philosopher Shildrick argues that hybrids challenge normativity, I feel that this speaks deeply to my eternal preoccupation with asking "why," particularly in consideration of established tropes surrounding common discourses of transplantation, namely spare parts surgery or the gift of life.²² This is echoed in my journeys navigating healthcare systems and in my professional life as a sociologist: challenging norms and taking a critical position is a way of being.

The internal experience of othering I have described is also reflected externally. As I was included in the national shielding programme, I received regular communications from society and the state, reminding me of how vulnerable I was and how important it was to stay inside. From December 2019, when the pandemic was more prevalent in Asia, I was already acutely aware that I might not survive. Although I felt my vulnerability and a lack of understanding from those around me from an early age, this is the first time that this was happening on a global scale. The national figures of disabled people dying due to COVID-19 really pressed into me, as I contemplated how society fails to demonstrate the value of my life whilst being reminded of the likelihood of my death.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-5-Shielding-Lettersjpg-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg>

Figure 5. A selection of Sophie's many letters received providing information about the shielding programme and being clinically extremely vulnerable. Photo by Sophie Savage, 2020.

Dominic Cummings, former advisor to the former UK Prime Minister, published photos of a whiteboard in 2021, which depicts an early plan for the governmental response to the pandemic. On it appeared the chilling question: who do we not save?²³ To answer this question, the Office for National Statistics published data in November 2020, which showed that 59 percent of the people who have died of COVID-19 were disabled people.²⁴

Being diagnosed with childhood liver disease from an early age has meant I have always had an awareness of my own mortality, however, the reality of the pandemic is quite different. Remembering the children I met and made friends with in hospital, how we learnt together in the schoolroom, played and shared meal times at the dinner table, swapping gameboy games before lights out. Many of my young comrades who, like me, were adorned with a wristband showing our hospital number, were lost. Families were

devastated and those caring for us were worn down. The ongoing loss increases pressure to improve treatments and services, so more of us could have the opportunity of enjoying our childhoods and what might come after. When I read the statistics mentioned above of those dying in the pandemic due to the callous, unfeeling, and eugenicist approach from the UK government, I returned to that space of being a child in hospital, surrounded by desperate families and incredible health workers, and I despaired. The pain of losing these strangers discussed on the news was felt constantly. I spent my life grieving the children from my ward and dealing with feelings of guilt as to why I did not join them in death at a young age. Therefore I do not feel I can separate myself from these statistics, these lives that were lives, that were lived, that did happen, and that each and everyone are important and vital. Luck and privilege stand between myself and others, and I am cognisant of this every day. On one hand, the government sends messages that you are considered CEV and told to stay home and stay safe. Yet, disabled people are not always able to get access to essential care and supplies, with serious consequences demonstrated in the growing numbers of those who have sadly died from COVID. These losses are reduced to numbers, an echo of the ways in which the system recognizes us once again. The pain of this reframing of these people as ungrievable is too hard to bear.

Disabled poet and activist Karl Knights has described this disproportionate impact on the disabled population as the “daily eugenics” which he feels is becoming sickeningly “normalised.”²⁵ During this time, the UK government imposed “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) measures on some disabled people; this meant they were not to be resuscitated even if there was the choice to do so, prioritising some lives over others.²⁶

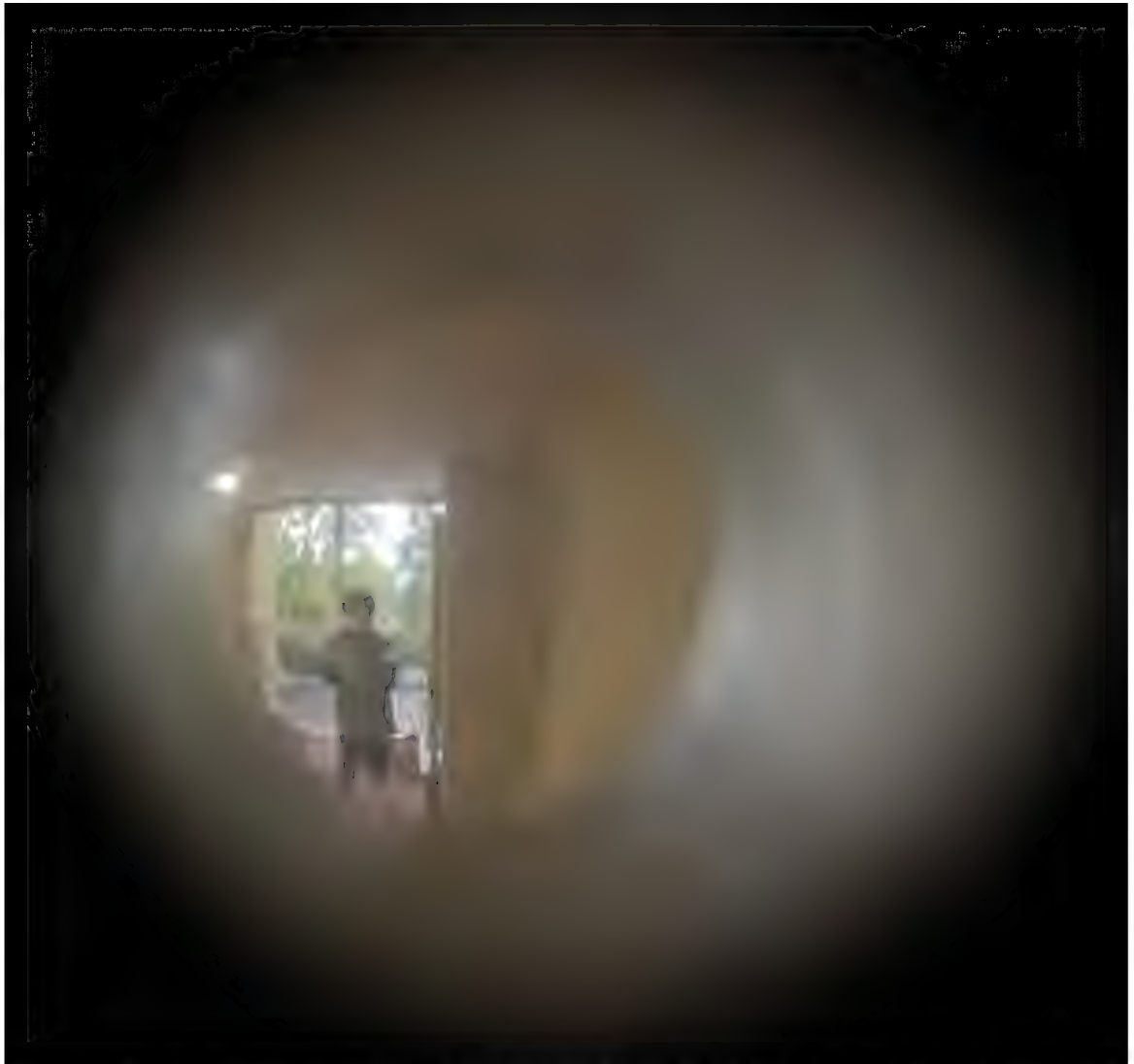
Speaking with Denise about how she feels about these DNR measures as my close friend, she reflects how horrifyingly unfair it is and how such an inhumane process was even considered. If I had died in the first wave of the pandemic when these measures were in action, Denise tells me that she can imagine feeling rage, injustice, and deep grief. In considering how my life is valued, how I would be missed, how I do matter, how I am a part of a family, a chosen family, friendships, communities, and a workplace. I do exist, I am loved, and I am grievable. To consider how many people—whose friends and loved ones feel the same as Denise feels about me—have lost their friends, weighs heavily and has affected us both profoundly. Applying DNR measures to disabled people, for most people, is truly unthinkable.

In regards to what Knights describes as “daily eugenics,”²⁷ the application of DNR's in combination with loss of access to essential care, long waitlists for necessary treatment, digital exclusion and social isolation, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on disabled people is clearly argued.²⁸

During shielding, few people acknowledged my reality, and others would frame my cautions around safety and strict adherence to guidelines as proof of paranoia and anxiety. I am an anxious person, so it is easy to link my mental health with my behaviour in all realms of life. There are many examples whereby people have framed my actions in relation to the pandemic akin to a narrative of anxiety rather than physical safety and response to a life-threatening contagion. Perhaps it is easier to gaslight a disabled person as hysterical rather than acknowledging how ableism devalues my life and places me amongst the ungrievable masses.

To be made vulnerable and ungrievable demonstrates the ways that capitalism and austerity measures marginalized lives, as someone's "value" is based upon productivity and how individuals can service capitalism.²⁹ The pressure to perform is paramount; a person's value is based on their productivity and those with bodies built for endurance are prioritised over all others.³⁰

In my attempts to navigate the dominant discourse of "uberperformance"³¹ and the ways in which disabled people have been made vulnerable during the pandemic, I found myself working long hours to my own detriment to demonstrate that I have value. I acknowledge here the ills of internalized capitalism as I equate my sense of self with what I am worth to the systems I serve, balancing my existence on my productivity. This immoral calculation has haunted me since birth as I have, since I was a child, had a growing awareness of the cost of my medical care and this sense of owing the state an unrepayable debt is pervasive. I can logically critique the systems of oppression and their impression on my well-being, however, there is seemingly little time to process all that is happening. Through exhaustion, I continue.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-6-Visitis-during-lockdown-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 6. Sophie's view through the front door of friends visiting during lockdown. Photo by Sophie Savage, 2021.

3b. Denise

During the pandemic, HK was undergoing a period of civil unrest, and the National Security Law brought in greater punitive measures around freedom of expression.³² There is a stark contrast between the reality of HK to what is reported in the international media as this period has highlighted differing views on authoritarian rule and neoliberalism.³³ The reality was that freedoms were being revoked under the guise of COVID-19 safety, including the right to protest, gather, censorship and obliteration of democracy as political parties with an oppositional stance have been arrested, making HK a one-party state.³⁴ From the historical context of British rule and the current authoritarian regime from China, people from HK have been dealing with an existential crisis of national identity.³⁵



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-7-York-Hong-Kong-Overlay-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 7. The overlay photos of York and Hong Kong demonstrate a parallel to Denise's sense of identity and belonging. Photo by Denise Wong, 2015.

This crisis of identity is one I hold. In the UK, I have been undergoing a process of establishing my identity as a British East-Asian citizen: I am both from HK and British. In public spaces here, I am subjected to racism, where my identity is rejected. Conversely, HK is no longer the place that I know, nor can I return to, due to the pandemic. There is fragmentation in both places I call home, making it difficult to find belonging. Having struggled with this identity crisis for years, I began seeking others with similar narratives, who share my pains and feel out of place. I found grounding and a sense of self in developing practices that allow me to celebrate my culture, mainly in food and traditions surrounding different festivals. In this period, I lost some connections, but I also found new friends and joined networks of people navigating similar journeys. Connections old and new along with work in therapy allowed me the space to grieve for the loss of one of my homes and a pivotal sense of self.

The complexity of racism in the UK gives rise to self-doubt when experiencing anti-Asian hate.³⁶ Within the UK, the racism, violence, oppression and othering directed at the East-Asian population is hidden; there is a lack of representation and connection to the lived experience of East-Asians residing in the UK, regardless of whether the UK is their country of origin.³⁷ Platforms for discussion of anti-Asian hate crimes have increased since the

beginning of the pandemic, providing space for working through people's experiences of being East-Asian in the UK.³⁸

Coming from a majority population in HK and moving to the UK as an adult, I recognized both the systems of oppression within society and racial-hate directed towards me, particularly in public spaces. As I grew up in a society where I am of the dominant race, initially I lacked the vocabulary to articulate and process my experience. I am acutely aware of the colonial history and prevailing racial discrimination from the East Asian population towards other POC. However, I grew to recognize my vulnerability in the UK and the importance of sharing my experiences for fear of my own safety.

There was a disproportionate representation of East-Asian faces within the media for general updates about the pandemic unrelated to the pandemic situation in Asia, reinforcing the idea that East-Asian people were the face of the virus and potential carriers.³⁹ Fang and Liu discuss how terminology such as "Chinese Virus" was used often by people in positions of power, which again reinforced and fueled anti-Asian hate crimes.⁴⁰ Reflecting on the growing vulnerability to hate crime at the start of the pandemic, Fang and Liu refer to incidences of feeling watched and changing their behavior, so they did not enter public spaces unaccompanied.⁴¹ They mentioned a particular incidence of being spat at, which is all the more horrifying in the context of COVID and how it is spread.⁴²

Throughout the pandemic, I have found myself conflated with the virus. My personality and professional identities became irrelevant. When in public spaces with my face mask on, I have experienced different degrees of invasive surveillance, from peripheral observations to overt staring, distancing and tutting, making public spaces hostile. COVID-19 has been assimilated into the ensemble of racist discourse; though previously I would be called acutely racist words relating to my ethnicity in public spaces, and although verbal abuse is a common occurrence more generally for women, this intensified during the first UK lockdown. One weekend in the first month of the March 2020 lockdown, my white male partner and I were going for our state-mandated daily walk on the local high street when a car of two or three young white men drove past. They kept driving when they passed us, as the man on the front passenger seat rolled down the window, and yelled "corona corona" whilst leaning out of the window, moving his arm and fist in a circular motion to get my attention. This cowardly public attack was the first case of racial aggression towards me being related directly to COVID-19 and this frames my experience of societal perceptions of East Asians living in the UK at the start of the pandemic.

Within my care network here in the UK, no one else understood the first month of the pandemic the same way Sophie did. Sophie introduced me to Nini Fang and her work as Sophie had recognized the potential for its resonance with my experience.⁴³ This introduction invoked a powerful response both personally and professionally, leading to further reflections in other spaces, including a music therapy conference presentation and subsequent podcast.⁴⁴ Although Sophie is not Asian, there is a similar sense of being othered, reduced, and made vulnerable that cuts through our differences, whilst still learning from each other. I continually updated Sophie about what was happening in HK because we already had this instantaneous understanding of each other's experiences. Without a potential fear of othering, prejudice, or discrimination, there was no need to foreground or preface my triggered state regarding my previous experiences of living through SARS, I knew Sophie got it.

Although I was following similar practices as Fang and Liu mentioned, by avoiding being in public spaces unaccompanied, I still experienced hate crimes.⁴⁵ I was reduced to an embodiment of the virus, and I was to be blamed, avoided, and shunned. Even within virtual spaces, I faced discrimination as I encountered "microaggressions." During an online seminar for music therapy trainees during the early months of the pandemic, an educational professional described another trainee's zoom name as "exotic," and jokingly asked if there was anyone "foreign" here. As it happened, I was the only trainee present who was not white and not born in England. What compounded the hurt at that time was that a "friend" on my course did not try to understand my experience as it was happening, which furthered the othering. This experience highlighted how virtual spaces exposed the undercurrent of prejudice that is always present in public spaces.⁴⁶

As I live in a body with an inflammatory reaction to environmental factors, this means constant adaptation. Having an Asian body in an environment whilst being equated with "the virus" has also triggered ongoing adaptation. My sense of embodied belonging fluctuates due to the severity of inflammation which is exacerbated by stress, also fueled by the ongoing identity crisis from my fractured homes. With the continuous pandemic challenges mentioned above, there is a pervasive sense of non-belonging in the ways in which I am perceived in public spaces and how I exist in my body.

My understanding of eczema is that it is an immunological attack on myself, which complicates my feelings when experiencing racism. I am attacked by both the racist reactions from other people attacking me for my skin colour, but also my body is attacking me through inflammation and pain. Racism is never acceptable but the ongoing inflammation, breaking, bleeding, and pain due to eczema further contributes to the ways in which I am made vulnerable. Skin is the body's barrier and one of the

ways we can interact with the outside world; therefore, this immunological response to the environment, which I have to cope with daily, is magnified by the experience of racism. Being Asian while having eczema during a pandemic is an intense and dynamic experience of othering.

This reflection on internal and external processes is felt by us both and demonstrates how profoundly the concept of access intimacy characterizes our relationship: we are truly with each other in all this mess.⁴⁷ As racism and ableism increase stress and othering, this depletes our well-being and sense of self. Despite belonging to various minoritized populations, our intersectional experiences of the internal and external othering are not necessarily universal, and the connection between the bodily reaction to the outside, whilst navigating immunological conflict provides anchors for a rich understanding and empathy of each other. Working against othering to create a sense of belonging and value for us both.

4. Together We Flourish

Our previous vignettes have focused on our individual experiences and the challenges we have faced regarding ableism, racism and othering, and we began discussing our mutual understanding of navigating the pandemic. For this closing section of the essay, we will be providing vignettes narrating key moments in our relationship during the pandemic and whilst writing this essay from our shared point of view. Care, as we have been arguing, is vital, so we will offer ideas around care as tenets of interdependent living, engaging with the importance of solidarity, creativity and love.⁴⁸

4a. Tea, Okonomiyaki, and More Birthday Cake

Being together in the “mess” of the pandemic has been crucial at a time where we have been exhausted from having to explain our experiences and from having to be patient with others who do not have the awareness or experience to understand our reality, and constantly having to prove our value and worth in order to access daily essentials, healthcare, work and life.⁴⁹ As we have been demonstrating, the concept of access intimacy encapsulates the importance of having people in your life who have a deep understanding of your experience and prioritize your access to all realms of life.

In the final edit of this essay, we were introduced to the concept of access intimacy by Theodora, one of the editors of this special edition. As we sat next to each other in Denise’s living room, holding large mugs of tea, we first read Mia Mingus’s essay on “Access Intimacy” on different laptops.⁵⁰ We both read and stopped reading at the

same line, which we have included in our glossary and referred back to several times during writing. As is quite common for us, we communicated through a look, and then both paused to say “this is it, this is what it is, this is our relationship.” We paused and reflected on all the mess we have been in together from the start, the pandemic in particular, which we have been processing through writing, editing, talking, laughing, and crying our way through.

With access to lateral flow tests and vaccinations, our lives have changed significantly in the different phases of the pandemic and through the writing of this essay. However, the following vignette offers insight into the intuitive attention we provide each other regarding our access needs, which gives shape to how we practice access intimacy and the sheer joy that comes from this, whilst still navigating hostile environments.⁵¹

When Sophie visited Denise in November 2021, it was the first occasion since the pandemic began for us to be together inside. We isolated and tested so this could happen—the first non-family house visit. In the kitchen, Sophie managed all the tasks involving wet hands and Denise gave clear instructions whilst taking charge of the frying. We made okonomiyaki (Osaka style savoury pancake), a cucumber salad and rice for dinner and enjoyed locally-made vegan doughnuts for dessert. It was a really special meal, we celebrated many things. There was a sense of it being a new chapter in the pandemic as we could physically be in the same indoor space. We cooked, ate together, and hugged. Being together in such a way allows us to bear the ongoing challenges of the pandemic and gives us something to look forward to in the future, enjoying our shared love—food.



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-8-Together-we-Flourish-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg>

Figure 8. We celebrated triumphs! Photo courtesy of Asa Doktor, 2021.

We both love food; it contributes holistically to our well-being, and the choices we make around which food we eat together adds a sense of celebration and shared joy. As we both encounter reminders of non-belonging often, the practice of sharing food and the importance we place on particular foods works against this and allows us to create a space of belonging with each other.⁵² This practice of sharing food is not exclusive to our relationship but also to our wider support network, which has always been important to us.

In the middle of summer 2021, we climbed Pen y Fan, the highest peak in South Wales, to celebrate Sophie's birthday with our closest friends.⁵³ As we walked, we shared homemade cakes and stories. The members of this group are an important part of our network of care. When climbing a mountain, a goal is to climb to the summit. Similarly,

this trip marks a special point at which, despite all the challenges of the pandemic, we are all still here, fully vaccinated and living a full life.

Climbing the mountain *together* has been key to the feeling of success and achievement. If we didn't eat together, if we didn't hike together, if we didn't plan the trip together or share stories together, there would be no meaning to achieving the goal of climbing to the summit: the journey of walking up and down the summits, together, is what mattered the most.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Image-9-Together-at-the-top-Crip-Pandemic-Life-A-Tapestry.jpg> >

Figure 9. We continue climbing mountains together. Photo by Sophie Savage, 2021.

4b. Where People Flourish: our call for growing caring networks!

Through discussing our experiences during the pandemic, we elaborate on how we are being made vulnerable and ungrievable and how the pandemic has consistently challenged our sense of embodied belonging. As a POC and as a disabled person, we have deeply

political bodies and could have joined the disproportionate number of our marginalized comrades lost so far.⁵⁴

Communities of care must be accessible to all and prioritise those who are marginalized.⁵⁵ We recognize the need for caring communities, which create environments where people flourish and practise interdependency and access intimacy.⁵⁶ Communities can organize goals addressing the growing pressures of living in an era of neoliberalism and capitalism, including, sharing resources, spaces, skills, and time to work towards mutual thriving.⁵⁷ For example, the British East and Southeast Asian Network aims to promote positive representation of the East and Southeast Asian population in the UK using podcasts, providing space to share food, workshops, and training for allies.⁵⁸

The concept of embodied belonging allowed us to engage with deeply felt experiences of navigating society, institutions, and systems of care.⁵⁹ This process invigorates hope in reconnecting with our deeply political bodies at a time where such connection is most fragile and vital. We argue the importance of forming caring communities accessible for all and supporting existing networks in your local communities based on the concept of mutual aid, sharing resources, cooperative working, and acknowledging interdependence.⁶⁰

5. Concluding Thoughts

There was so much work throughout the pandemic to keep us both healthy and to safeguard our lives and our wellbeings. The mountain climb truly began from the moment we met, and we are continually hiking up metaphorical mountains together, mountains like new diagnoses, encounters with ableism, racism, xenophobia, marriage, moving house, and celebrating milestones. The opportunities we have to share our lives with each other and our network gives us the fuel to keep going, to keep resisting, creating, and working. The strength we gain from our caring connections ensures that we are also key sources of support for each other and many others around us. The access intimacy present in our relationship gives us the much needed foundation to work and grow from. Without strong close friendships like ours, the limitations placed upon marginalized individuals like us are compounded. By resisting together, we are empowered to be central to our care networks and to connect with and support others, who have also faced othering and exclusion. Together we flourish.

6. Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the vital work of Lausan and other independent publications in HK, specifically addressing the ongoing civil unrest. The courageous work of these activists and journalists is essential in providing a richer picture of what's happening in HK. We are aware that similar publications are being shut down, and arrests are being made, so we cannot guarantee that Lausan will still be accessible at the time of publication. 香港加油!

Notes

1. Vera Chok, "Yellow," in *The Good Immigrant*, ed. Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2017), 39. ↩
2. Zuzana Maďarová, Pavol Hardoš, and Alexandra Ostertágová, "What Makes Life Grievable? Discursive Distribution of Vulnerability in the Pandemic," *Czech Journal of International Relations* 55, no. 4 (2020): 12, <https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.1737> < <https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.1737> > . ↩
3. Maďarová, Hardoš, and Ostertágová, "What Makes Life Grievable?," 12. ↩
4. Dominik Mattes and Claudia Lang, "Embodied Belonging: In/exclusion, Health Care, and Well-Being in a World in Motion," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 45 (November 2021): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-020-09693-3> / < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-020-09693-3> > . ↩
5. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice," *Leaving Evidence*, April 12, 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/> > . ↩
6. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↩
7. Department of Health and Social Care, "Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Receive Updated Guidance in Line with New National Restrictions," *GOV.UK*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/clinically-extremely-vulnerable-receive-updated-guidance-in-line-with-new-national-restrictions> < <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/clinically-extremely-vulnerable-receive-updated-guidance-in-line-with-new-national-restrictions> > . ↩
8. NHS, "Important Advice to Keep You Safe from Coronavirus," letter posted to Sophie, March 21, 2020. ↩
9. SARS was a pandemic that extended beyond Asia, even though the severity and impact was not as prevalent in the West. However, it was reported that the Chinatown areas in New York City, for example, were deserted, as Western society equated East Asian people homogeneously with the virus. See Kim Yi Dionne and Fulya Felicity Turkmen, "The Politics Of Pandemic Othering: Putting Covid-19 In Global And Historical Context," *International Organisation* 74, no. S1 (December 2020): E213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000405>. ↩
10. Sophie Savage, "The Heaviest Burdens and Life's Most Intense Fulfilment: A Retrospective and Re-Understanding of my Experiences with Childhood Liver Disease and Transplantation," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Disabled Children's Childhood Studies*, ed. Katherine Runswick-Cole, Tillie Curran, and Kirsty Liddiard (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), 41–56, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54446-9> < <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54446-9> > . ↩
11. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: the Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 1. ↩

12. Beth Cruse et al., "LIVE: Bristol Protests for Anti-Lockdown, NHS Pay and Palestine Solidarity Taking Place Today," *Bristol Live*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/live-bristol-protests-anti-lockdown-5418526> < <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/live-bristol-protests-anti-lockdown-5418526>> . ↩
13. Liz Sayce, "The Forgotten Crisis: Exploring the Disproportionate Impact of the Pandemic on Disabled People," *Health Foundation*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/the-forgotten-crisis-exploring-the-disproportionate-impact-of-the-pandemic> < <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/the-forgotten-crisis-exploring-the-disproportionate-impact-of-the-pandemic>> . ↩
14. Maďarová, Hardoš, and Ostertágová, "What Makes Life Grievable?" 12; Mattes and Lang, "Embodied Belonging," 3. ↩
15. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↩
16. Migrants and minority populations have often been discriminated against and blamed for spreading infectious diseases, particularly during pandemics. See Zuzana Maďarová, Pavol Hardoš, and Alexandra Ostertágová, "What Makes Life Grievable? Discursive Distribution of Vulnerability in the Pandemic," *Czech Journal of International Relations* 55, no. 4 (2020): 11, <https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.1737> < <https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.1737>> . SARS was a pandemic that extended beyond Asia, even though the severity and impact was not as prevalent in the West. However, it was reported that the Chinatown areas in New York City, for example, were deserted, as Western society equated East-Asian people homogeneously with the virus. See Kim Yi Dionne and Fulya Felicity Turkmen, "The Politics Of Pandemic Othering: Putting Covid-19 In Global And Historical Context," *International Organisation* 74, no. S1 (December 2020): E213, <https://doi:10.1017/S0020818320000405>. ↩
17. Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 54. ↩
18. World Health Organisation, "Updated WHO Recommendations for International Traffic in Relation to COVID-19 Outbreak," World Health Organisation, last modified February 29, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/updated-who-recommendations-for-international-traffic-in-relation-to-covid-19-outbreak> < <https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/updated-who-recommendations-for-international-traffic-in-relation-to-covid-19-outbreak>> ; Steve West, university-wide email to author, March 5, 2020, <https://comms.uwe.ac.uk/t/2GDZ-1K2U1-0E232M8C37/cr.aspx> < <https://comms.uwe.ac.uk/t/2GDZ-1K2U1-0E232M8C37/cr.aspx>> . ↩
19. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↩
20. Margrit Shildrick, "Staying Alive: Affect, Identity and Anxiety in Organ Transplantation," *Body & Society* 21, no. 3 (2015): 31; < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15585886>> <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15585886/> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15585886/>> . ↩
21. Shildrick, "Staying Alive," 32. ↩
22. Shildrick, "Staying Alive," 33. ↩
23. Rachel Schraer, "Dominic Cummings: What was on his Whiteboard?" *BBC News*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-57254654> / < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-57254654>> . ↩
24. Sayce, "The Forgotten Crisis." ↩
25. Karl Knights (@Inadarkwood), "Because living with the normalisation of eugenics every day in the UK is unbearably hard, I am once again presenting you my favourite video on the internet," Twitter, February 24, 2021, <https://twitter.com/inadarkwood/status/1364671979710734338> / < <https://twitter.com/inadarkwood/status/1364671979710734338>> . ↩
26. Sayce, "Forgotten Crisis." ↩
27. Knights, "Because living." ↩
28. Sayce, "Forgotten Crisis." ↩

29. Ana Bê Pereira, "Employment, Ableism and Uber-Performance: Towards a Crip-Queer Theory of Resistance," *Queer Disability Studies Network*, accessed October 6, 2021, <https://queerdisabilitystudies.wordpress.com/employment-ableism-and-uber-performance-towards-a-crip-queer-theory-of-resistance/> < <https://queerdisabilitystudies.wordpress.com/employment-ableism-and-uber-performance-towards-a-crip-queer-theory-of-resistance/> > . ↩
30. Pereira, "Employment, Ableism." ↩
31. Pereira, "Employment, Ableism." ↩
32. Vincent Wong and JS, "Beijing's new national security laws and the future of Hong Kong" *Lausan*, May 22, 2020, <https://lausan.hk/2020/beijings-new-national-security-laws-and-the-future-of-hong-kong> < <https://lausan.hk/2020/beijings-new-national-security-laws-and-the-future-of-hong-kong> > . ↩
33. Lausan Collective and IZ3W, "Hong Kong's Colonial System is Still Intact," *Lausan*, October 25, 2021, <https://lausan.hk/2021/hong-kong-colonial-system-is-still-alive> < <https://lausan.hk/2021/hong-kong-colonial-system-is-still-alive> > ; Zoe Zhao, "Facing Down the Hong Kong Protests' Right-Wing Turn," *Lausan*, March 28, 2020, <https://lausan.hk/2020/facing-down-the-hong-kong-protests-right-wing-turn> < <https://lausan.hk/2020/facing-down-the-hong-kong-protests-right-wing-turn> > ; Vincent Wong, "Where neoliberalism and authoritarianism meet," *Lausan*, August 3, 2020, <https://lausan.hk/2020/where-neoliberalism-and-authoritarianism-meet> < <https://lausan.hk/2020/where-neoliberalism-and-authoritarianism-meet> > . ↩
34. Shui-yin Sharon Yam and Hung X.L., "Hong Kong's Mass Arrests are an Assault on Grassroots Advocacy," *Lausan*, January 7, 2021, <https://lausan.hk/2021/hong-kong-mass-arrests> < <https://lausan.hk/2021/hong-kong-mass-arrests> > . ↩
35. Edward Hon-Sing Wong, "Insurgent Politics Amid Hong Kong's Existential Crisis," *Lausan*, August 30, 2019, <https://lausan.hk/2019/insurgent-politics-against-the-backdrop-of-hong-kongs-existential-crisis> < <https://lausan.hk/2019/insurgent-politics-against-the-backdrop-of-hong-kongs-existential-crisis> > . ↩
36. Viv Yau, "Meet Viv's Boyfriend: Inter-racial Dating, Who's Funnier: Jollof Rice and Noodles," in *But where are you from?*, besea.n, July 18, 2021, Podcast, 01:10:00, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2c4naOWvMlwKsMx0RKWTI?si=Nr8G-M4-RBiXGnjyOQf52Q> < <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2c4naOWvMlwKsMx0RKWTI?si=Nr8G-M4-RBiXGnjyOQf52Q> > . ↩
37. Lee, "East Side Voices," introduction to *Essays Celebrating East and Southeast Asian Identity in Britain* (London: Sceptre, 2022); Vera Chok, "Yellow," in *The Good Immigrant*, ed. Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2017), 43. ↩
38. British East and South East Asian Network, "Mission Statement," besea.n, last modified January 29, 2021, <https://www.besean.co.uk/mission-statement> < <https://www.besean.co.uk/mission-statement> > ; Georgie Ma, "Highs and Lows of Being a British Born Chinese (BBC)," in *Chinese Chippy Girl*, August 7, 2021, Podcast, 36:00, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6iPcVmCiWYpLV3Ygyvdp5t/> < <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6iPcVmCiWYpLV3Ygyvdp5t/> > ; Annie Oh, "Susie Lau aka Susie Bubble," in *Don't Call Me "Exotic"*, March 3, 2022, Podcast, 43:00, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0oyQIk1BtOBE2ovndUyGL?si=XiKHWpvsRoSBlv2KwthLEg/> < <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0oyQIk1BtOBE2ovndUyGL?si=XiKHWpvsRoSBlv2KwthLEg/> > . ↩
39. Alexa Phillips, "'Coronavirus Given The Face Of An East Asian Person': Parliament Debates Racism during Pandemic," *Sky News*, October 13, 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-given-the-face-of-an-east-asian-person-parliament-debates-racism-during-pandemic-12102897> < <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-given-the-face-of-an-east-asian-person-parliament-debates-racism-during-pandemic-12102897> > . ↩
40. Nini Fang and Shan-Jan Sarah Liu, "Critical Conversations: Being Yellow Women in the Time of COVID-19," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 2 (2021): 334,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1894969/> <
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1894969/>> . ↵

41. Fang and Liu, "Critical Conversations," 336. ↵
 42. Fang and Liu, "Critical Conversations," 337. ↵
 43. Fang and Liu, "Critical conversations," 337. ↵
 44. Denise Wong and Davina Vencatasamy, "Intersectionality of Gender, Age and Being 'Yellow': Experiences of an East-Asian Music Therapist" (virtual poster presentation, European Music Therapy Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, July 8–12, 2022);
Davina Vencatasamy, "Episode 71 Denise Wong," in *Music Therapy Conversations*, British Association for Music Therapy, February 22, 2023, Podcast, 01:10:41,
<https://www.bamt.org/DB/podcasts-2/denise-wong> < <https://www.bamt.org/DB/podcasts-2/denise-wong>> . ↵
 45. Fang and Liu, "Critical conversations," 337. ↵
 46. Francis Myerscough and Denise Wong, "(Un)Learning from Experience: An Exposition of Minoritized Voices on Music Therapy Training," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 40, no. 2 (2022): 138, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mtp/miac024> < <https://doi.org/10.1093/mtp/miac024>> . ↵
 47. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↵
 48. The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto*, 57. ↵
 49. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↵
 50. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↵
 51. Mingus, "Access Intimacy." ↵
 52. "Actively creating positive affective ties to place through sensorial practices such as food sharing can equally contribute to people's sense of belonging and well-being." Mattes and Lang, "Embodied Belonging," 7. ↵
 53. Located inside the Brecon Beacons National Park, Pen y Fan is one the most popular walks in Wales and is South Wales' highest peak (at 886 metres above sea level). The mountain is just over one and a half hours away from where we live in Bristol, and it was an easy day trip for us. See Daniel Graham, "Walk: Pen y Fan, Powys," BBC Countryfile Magazine, published September 8, 2022, <https://www.countryfile.com/go-outdoors/walks/pen-y-fan-brecon-beacons-wales> < <https://www.countryfile.com/go-outdoors/walks/pen-y-fan-brecon-beacons-wales>> . ↵
 54. Maďarová, Hardoš, and Ostertágová, "What Makes Life Grievable?," 13. ↵
 55. The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto*, 37–45. ↵
 56. The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto*, 45. ↵
 57. The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto*, 46; Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, "Still Dreaming, Wild Disability Justice Dreams At The End Of The World," in *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories From The Twenty-First Century*, ed. Alice Wong (New York: Vintage, 2020), 253–256. ↵
 58. British East and South East Asian Network, "Mission Statement," *besea.n*, last modified January 29, 2021, <https://www.besean.co.uk/mission-statement> < <https://www.besean.co.uk/mission-statement>> . ↵
 59. Mattes and Lang, "Embodied Belonging," 4. ↵
 60. The Care Collective, *Care Manifesto*, 37–45. ↵
-

Author Information



Sophie Savage

Sophie Savage is a disabled queer academic, working at the University of the West of England, Bristol as an Associate Lecturer in Sociology and completing a DPhil. Sophie is a psycho-social researcher who has a primary focus on disability, education, and social justice, most recent projects include Disability Rights and Robotics: Co-Producing Futures and has been trailblazing the use of telepresence teaching in higher education. Sophie is a member of the Association for Psychosocial Studies and a board member of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society.

[View all of Sophie Savage's articles.](#)



Denise Wong

Denise Wong is a disabled East Asian music therapist and academic originally from Hong Kong, and now based in Bristol, UK. She is a member of the British Association for Music Therapy and a registered professional on the Health and Care Professions Council. Denise works with children, young people, and adults impacted by trauma surrounding illness and disability in addition to working with NEHK, a community-led group for and by HongKongers living in the UK. She contributes to undergraduate teaching of healthcare professionals, specifically her experience surrounding racism and ageism. She is a forthcoming member of the advisor panel on the editorial board of the *British Journal of Music Therapy*.

[View all of Denise Wong's articles.](#)

Article details

Sophie Savage and Denise Wong, "Only Together, We Flourish: The Importance of Friendship and Care in Navigating Anti-Asian Hate and Shielding During COVID-19," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.11>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

600 mg of Lithium, Quarantine, and “Third-Spaces”

by Caroline He | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT With a mix of prose, critical reflection, and an accompanying series of drawings inside a daily planner, this intimate essay reimagines multiple conceptions of “space” in relation to different kinds of sickness and wellbeing. Meditating on COVID-19 quarantine spaces and bipolar disorder mood/mind-spaces allowed me to discover messed “third” spaces that explore margins, and complicate ideas of boundaries and binaries. Doing so allowed me to think through new possibilities of healing, restoration, and intimacy when we talk about mental health. I offer up my personal account of a young female Asian American graduate student navigating a ten-year struggle with clinical bipolar disorder, and the personal experiences of “madness,” relapse, and recovery during the winter and spring of 2021. I reflect on my daily routines inside my 800-square-foot apartment and my growing realization that prevailing ideas of “space” are incomplete and contradictory—but can be replete with futurities and learning possibilities. Fittingly, this creative piece does not endeavor to offer any neatly packaged analysis or solid conclusions. Instead, I present one account of grappling with mental illness under extraordinary circumstances and hope it can speak to individual and collective discussions on mental health, disability, and spatiality.

KEYWORDS pandemic, quarantine, COVID-19, space, mental health, third space

[Content warning: This essay contains discussion on suicidal ideation, mania/depression, and in-depth ruminations on mental health. It contains no graphic descriptions. The section entitled “A Perilous Third Space” contains the majority of the discussion on suicidal ideation.]

Self as/and Mood Disorder

As human beings, each of us are constituted with a collage of identities. I am defined by my identity as a first-generation Asian American woman who grew up in the Mississippi Delta. I envision myself as a young academic working in interdisciplinary fields. I am a writer and

artist—an introvert with a romantic appetite. Whether it be an exercise of ego or expression, we construe our identities to lend meaning to our lived experiences. That is why I also embrace my struggle of being disordered by mental health, with which I have used many words to describe (“suffer from,” “deal with,” “out of control,”) in attempts to helpfully name my cohabitation with bipolar disorder. My daily life involves constantly fencing off and regulating a condition that having control over is a survival necessity.

I have lived with bipolar II disorder (BP-II) since I was eighteen but was not properly diagnosed and medicated until I turned twenty-four. Bipolar disorder (BP) is a mood disorder and is frequently misdiagnosed as, or comorbid with, other mental health disorders, therefore complicating its treatment. Its defining feature is the mood-seesaw between depression and mania. Mania (or “hypo”-mania for BP-II) is defined by decreased need to sleep, euphoria, grandiose ideation, flight of ideas or speech, goal-driven activity, risk-taking behavior, and psychosis and hospitalization in some cases. My medication has been a regimen of anticonvulsants and mood stabilizers that treat a combination of anxiety, depression, and mania. Beyond this, lifestyle regulation—including sleep, diet, and exercise—are pivotal for staving off mental health instability. “Stability,” through these regimens, is key. But with all of the ways to manage a lifelong and “incurable” condition, sometimes circumstances still blindside you. Because while you can take melatonin, drink kale smoothies, and cut out the late night Malbec—and as you fastidiously work with psychiatrists, meditate, and philosophize about meaning—you could not anticipate that, in the middle of your first doctoral program year, you would have to gather your emotional and cerebral defenses for a pandemic that would exhaust every iota of coping.

From 2020 through 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis unlike anything experienced in living memory, and the isolation of the lockdown and being confined to an apartment on the fourteenth floor of a high-rise building would compel me to think about my bipolar disorder in tandem with my lived environment in a new light. On one hand, space could connote safety and sterility; on the other, it signaled incarceration and seclusion. The pandemic’s lockdown over American households was meant to cleanly cordon off public and communal “sickness” away from domestic and intimate spaces. This experience made me realize that my long-standing clinical experience with bipolar disorder management followed an eerily similar logic of needing to constantly delineate “manic” versus “depressive” states-of-being for the very real necessity of maintaining my well-being. I noticed that adhering to such binary logics, especially in the experience of quarantine and bipolar disorder, helped me monitor those tricky mental states. I first believed that these logics of space were all compatible, but as the bipolar episodes worsened during the erratic winter of 2021—and I teetered on the razored edges of doing-good and not-doing-so-good—my belief of how mental health could be understood became more complex.

In this following reflection of my personal experience, I contemplate the idea of “third spaces,” where the slipperiness of sick vs. well; order vs. chaos; structural vs. individual; and real vs. imagined are exposed and reinvented. Third spaces became my metaphysical, intellectual, and material counter-site that gave me a way to survive those disordered days. While this is an intimate account of an individual experience of bipolar disorder, I also wonder how my personal experience might resonate with a greater collective desire to think about “well-being” beyond neatly packaged physiologies or definitions.

Lockdown: Ordering Space

A cliché—if not morbid—experience we all had was one of marinating, suffocating, wilding during the COVID-19 quarantine. Our bodies were in constant confrontation with danger and safety that has become attached to space, and the heightened familiarity or obsessive awareness of it.

Like many people during lockdown, I developed a strong desire to demarcate what was “safe” or not. Between the advice of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and my own levels of comfort for leaving the house, it became obvious to me that “space” was integral to our well-being. During this semester of graduate school, I lived alone in a sparsely but eclectically furnished, not-too-cramped, not-too-abundant apartment. My daily life, restricted to 800-square-feet of bedroom, kitchen, living room, bath, comfortably provided me with safety. When the unconscionable state of the world was reduced to this manageable breadth, it handed me back a sense of reality. Cordoned off from the outside virulence, the apartment became a functional vessel for that fantasy microcosm. It was only inside this air bubble that I could keep my bipolar disorder in check. This pursuit for normalcy manifested through my daily routines. On an average day, I wake up in the late morning and take my 600 mg of lithium and 250 mg of lamotrigine. I would wash my face in between, eat some yogurt and eggs, and sink onto the couch or the makeshift dining room work-space to read and write. The graduate student’s consciousness lived on *Zoom*: three hour seminars, meetings, and TA sections. Fellow students and professors lamented, and sympathized, and extended grace and caring each day. Venturing out for groceries or appointments felt precarious and illicit. Everything around me felt threatening.

During quarantine, I worked hard to regulate my medication and curb bad habits like drinking or staying up until 4:00 a.m in order to avoid the types of breakdowns I feared were nourished by my growing anxiety. I kept my spirits up with Zoom dates and dabbling in new interests with all the newfound free time we had. Graduate school and leisure were relegated to specific “zones” at home in order to maintain a verisimilitude of normal life. I

went about the routines of this time in a kind of erratic haze devoid of contemplation as I was going through the motions to trudge through this school year. The constant variable I could rely on for well-being and daily consistency was the very organization of space between the inside and outside world—and also between each room and hall of my apartment into zones of work and leisure.

Disordering Space

It is common to think of space as the encapsulation of human-theorized boundaries. But space rendered as “mood” or “head”-space for me was equally real and important; transcribing bipolar disorder in inches of “depressive” and “manic” made the condition more manageable. The relationship between all these ideas of “spaces” in the months during lockdown began to stir up a sensation of “third space,” an idea which has been well theorized by scholars like Michel Foucault in his work on utopias and heterotopias, and Edward Soja in work on real, conceptual, and imagined spaces. While they worked on broad topics of cultural geography and institutional discourse, I wondered how conversations on mental illness could be tempered by similar ruminations.¹ We can define “third” spaces as binaristic slippages between material and immaterial perceptions of space. We read COVID-19 spatialities—which are literally constituted by governmental policy—as the type of human-theorized space we are all doubtlessly familiar with. The abstract representations of space, such as that “mood” or “head”-space I manage mental illness through, is also still understood as “real” despite being “imagined.” When these two constitutions of space were experienced in tandem in my winter and spring, they were not as easily reconciled side-by-side.

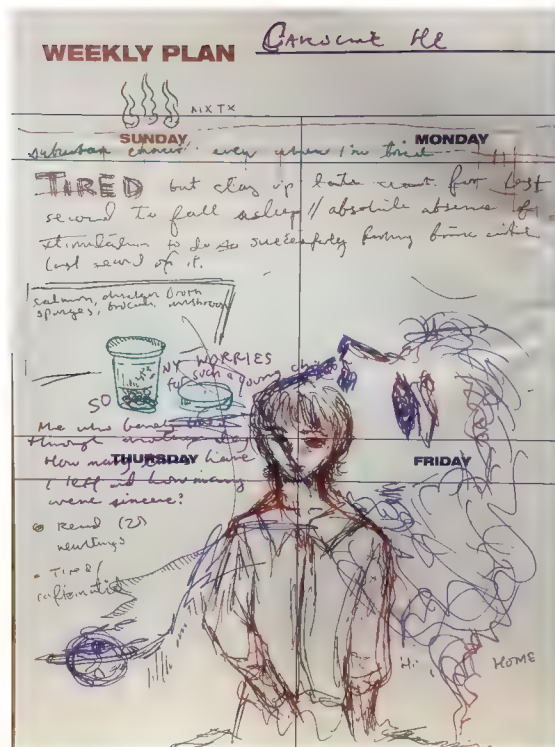
As lockdown went on, the tedium of routine became suffocating, and the need to “perform” wellness felt contrived. Months passed slowly, quickly, then tediously to limbo again as the first spring passed. I can describe it as simply as numbness. The task of earning a PhD was suddenly Herculean—and it made me feel like a fraud, philosophizing over Zoom to a screenful of strangers in a seminar while lounging on the couch in pajamas and a hoodie. Graduate school made me feel like a failure in every possible way, and I couldn’t rest easy using the pandemic as an excuse for that lethargy. Gradually, dishes were abandoned and beds were left unmade. Whereas before I had created designated spaces for “work” on my dining room table, now books and computer cables spilled onto kitchen counters and coffee tables—even floors.

It is “easy” to feel depressed in the disorganization of an apartment when these living quarters become one’s entire existence and the outside world is interminably closed off. The apartment felt more and more oppressive for no understandable reason. Not even a

hallway or curved lamp was neutral—whether it was the grating hum of the heating unit or lights that seemed to cast into a room a delusional normalcy of day and night. The physical sensation of a door handle or TV remote on my hand felt leaden. The recognizable lethargy was obvious when lying in a messy bedroom as a respite from social and academic obligation. The nightstand is a grim medicine cabinet, haphazardly organized and cold. My closet was an explosion of opened suitcases and broken hangers, and the seats of the living room sofa were sunk by hours of wine-night existential phone calls. I was bombarded by the unwanted awareness of too many small things with too much mental “fuzziness.” It reminded me of my mentally disordered college days, where my tiny dorm room functioned as the same kind of cozy, dark entrapment.

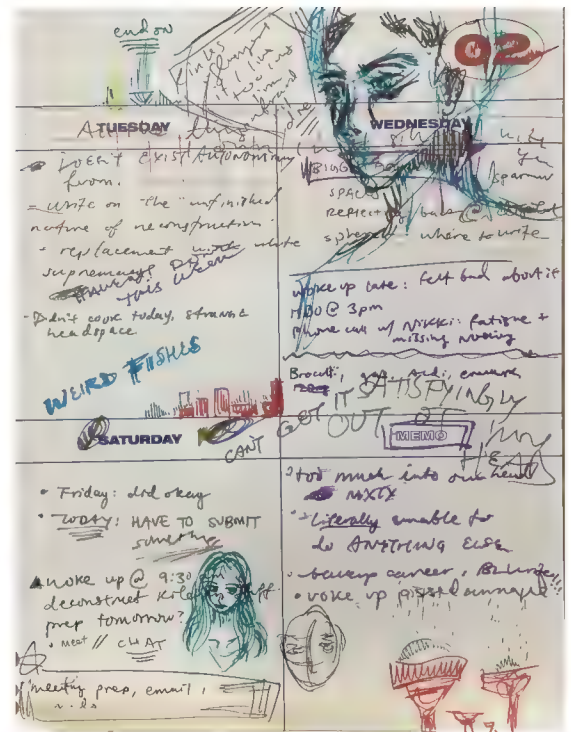
Mood States, Shapes, Spaces: Archive

I began to first find schisms of my spatialities in a daily planner I used to outline my schedules. I had a normal journal I used to write personal reflections in, but I inexplicably began to migrate to the planner for that purpose. Looking back on them now, it is interesting to note what sort of provenance is lost, especially as this type of template journal—part of just a K-pop holiday gift set—was undated to begin with. The understandings of these entries become reinterpreted in this new temporal moment of reevaluation.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FigA.Journal_Entry-Caroline-He.jpg >

Figure 1. February sensitivities are beginning to emerge. While the first weeks were filled out meticulously at the beginning of the year, they progressively fill up with stray thoughts and haphazard doodles: meal prep, mood journaling, agitated drawings, song lyrics.



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FigB.Journal_Entry-Caroline-He.jpg >

Figure 2. March tranquility sets in a bit with the changing of the seasons. These boxes are expressive of similar thoughts from February, but show the welcoming of a bit of peace. The entries are also filled with more drawings of human-esque forms. Here, I lean into a fuller embrace of this planner's newfound purpose.

Today, when I rifle through these old paper entries, I note that they are not a clean and reliable record of any particular mood-states. If anything, seeing the messiness of neatly boxed days of the months helped me gain a perceptual clarity of how I was subjectively experiencing these spaces I dwelled in during quarantine. And retrospectively, I realize that the specific ways I was organizing space as well-being was not neatly contained at all.

In the journal space, I deconstructed the neatly marked spaces of my apartment, the world, and my interiority. These deconstructions were cathartic. And, despite its chaos, it somehow made my tasks and passing days more knowable—the more disordered it became, the more I felt like the multiple filing cabinets in my brain and body were being consolidated. In organization, I see madness; in madness, I see organization.

The depressive side of bipolar disorder, unlike its euphoric cousin, is often what people seek psychiatric help for when the “good feelings” of mania subside. During depressive states, I spoke many times with my psychiatrist about medications as my moods fell flat. As

the more calm and predictable state of bipolar disorder, my depression nestles like a polymer into the cracks of being buzzed or blank. In some ways, it is the easier side to manage, but the hardest to “fix”— and the most agonizing. Yet, as hopeless as this all was, the depressive cycle was familiar to me. While the unique circumstances of COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated the onset and severity, I knew that as long as I endeavored to upkeep my routines, that this episode would pass.

The *manic* body is shared with the depressed one. While depressive moods were most prevalent and lingering, in the intermission of darkness and gloom, I arose like a glittery phoenix in the orange juice skies. Sometimes it feels like an obvious switch turned on, and other times it is near impossible to determine when the rupture happened. Despite many years of maintenance and knowledge, the onset euphoria of it still deludes me into believing that this remarkable instant is a permanent new lease on life.

My physical sensation of mania includes a tugging at my eyes, a throttling rattle, and a background hum of suspense. It feels like when the lingering flashes and music from a loud concert follow you home. When I first slipped into a manic cycle during lockdown, the apartment came alive slowly, as if the previous oppressive hums and dings began encouraging me instead by blasting me out of bed. I arose from sleep each morning a little bit less weighed down by depressive thoughts, finding it easier to sleep five hours a night and feel pumped the next day. Slowly came the mad-dash marathon of conversations, waking hours, drinking, eating, self-aggrandizing. In past manic episodes, I used to walk miles in the snow at midnight and smoke cigarettes. In this apartment, the bedroom, once that place of respite, became one of un-sleep; what was once a tepid apartment of quarantine became one that could not contain the snap crackle pop of mania. Usually, people around you can see these symptoms, but during COVID-19, social spaces of support were confined to neatly-boxed Zoom windows.

I draw attention to the tenuous and ineffective interpretations of space that were meant to demarcate the lines of where sickness and wellness persisted. In my experience in this short span of quarantine time, my dual mood states competed and worked to dismantle each other or meld together. The scariest part of this time for me was when mania drove me to feel disconnected from reality and disconnected from my body and impulse control. When you lose that grounded-ness in the neat delineation of types of spaces is perhaps where meditating on space is least cathartic.

A Perilous Third Space

[Content Warning: This section discusses non-graphic suicidal ideation.]

I spoke of kitchen counters, dining tables, lamps, nightstands, and oppressive hallways and rooms. I talked about parsing out mania and depression as a spectrum of mental states, still physiologically treated and defined by its definitive binaries. I also spoke of the slippery organizations of all these boundaries: in this coda, I no longer distinguish between mood states. One more space, which I morbidly call the final frontier, is the last third space I want to reflect upon.

In months, perhaps a year's time after tumbling through mood states and moments of respite, I developed a compulsive attraction to the most uncomfortable space of this quarantine apartment, beyond the warm physical walls that blueprinted my daily routine. Or rather, a unique space *outside* of it. In pandemic-speak, the "outside" world came to be equated with a definitive horror that can be negated by the indoors. Yet, the dual side of "outside" became a desired place of escape.

On the fourteenth floor, mine is a wrap-around railing with two deck chairs and a wooden white table; standing there, you face the western sky and are greeted with a wide expanse of forest. The balcony, hovering above the air and connected to my apartment, is horror and liberation melded together in a morbid and fatal sense—"release" and "relief." In the biting cold wind of winter, the crisp air represents primordial and unadulterated freedom; looking up at the blue sky evokes the grandeur of space and simultaneously its absence. As one must exit the apartment to step onto it, the balcony has come to represent the "outside" world beyond the safety of quarantined boundaries. It is the sensation of freedom attached to a fear of straying too far into a horrifying world—the promise of a breath of fresh air mixed with worries of viral contamination. This is a world uncontained by walls—and that there is sweet ground that so easily ends existence. It was easy for me to see a correlation between depression and tall buildings—a thought I will leave here incomplete. But the short, delicious manic flare-up painted the balcony with newfound pizzazz, soar—a pavement of anticipation that welcomes release. The way I began to read this space in the throes of mania became completely different. It paralleled how I compartmentalized space into safe physical and psychological zones—and it echoed the very breakdown of those boundaries by offering a world of different logics and of contradictory yet coexisting realities.

This *third space* is a space not quite *inside* or quite *outside*, not quite firmly a space of safety or danger. Not quite a respite or crisis of slow, fast, compact, and frenetic manic depressive states. It offered the safety of comfort, order, and wellness—and it was also a necessary relief from it. Thinking back, I do not think I was in real danger of harming myself. My preoccupation with that balcony was more of an analogy for making sense of scrambled spatiality and temporality as a global health crisis raged on outside. All while my privileged sanctuary posed "serene" personal reckoning with mental health. I stress the

difficulty in both upholding and deconstructing notions of boundaries—as the events of these months have shown how important materially and abstractly constructed spaces are to all types of survival. But, I at least think invigorating imaginaries lie in third-ing spaces and exploring such existential-physical-intellectual slippages.

The experience of all these mental states blurring together was reflected in the very process of writing this essay, particularly toward this very last section. The somewhat disorderliness of it reflected an impulse to write about my bipolar disorder beyond binaristic or narrative structures. In reveling in and playing with this messiness, I let a lot of concrete understanding and clarity linger in the margins. And perhaps that is most fitting. I lean into what La Marr Jurelle Bruce discussed in his book *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, meditating with new conceptions of “madness,” and spaces where madness can be claimed—specifically in contexts that defy social norms.² If taboo topics like suicide and mental health can be bridged with conversations on intimate spaces and how they are linked to a collective experience, such as the inconceivable tragedies of the pandemic, then reflecting on madness and the experience of the pandemic together may offer “third spaces” of renewal previously unthought of.

Reflection: Potentialities of Space in Healing

I hope my reflection on “space” and the possibilities of different such spaces comes across as an empathetic one. Loosely drawing from some thinkers on space and time, I offer individual experiences of mental health in parallel with collective global health crises disasters, starting from just this one tale inside a single apartment complex. Third spaces are ones that dwell in the margins and complicate the production of perfect boundaries and binaries—inclinations that can be counterproductive to other possibilities of healing, restoration, and intimacy.

By late spring and summer 2021, the loosening up of COVID-19 restrictions interjected some normalcy back into my life. The freedom that accompanied it doubtlessly freed some people (like me) yet put more vulnerable communities at risk. It is a tension still being negotiated. This essay tries to add to a bigger conversation on how we rely on definitions to encapsulate some material reality of mental health. Our experiences cannot be condensed into “knowable” handbooks and protocols. And we cannot skimp on the conversation around social models of disability and larger power structures that define bodies as ill or necrotic—whether that be born from a pandemic or discussions on mental health. As Soja and Foucault have suggested, third spaces and heterotopias are inherently counter-sites.

They call for a public and collectivist discussion of space—an ethos I see emerge also in communal discussions of mental health that move beyond individual spheres of intimacy.

The unfortunate side effect of post-manic/depressive haze, especially now years later, helped me accept that repair does not have to equal a clear-cut mastery over a mental condition; it can be a slow celebration of that learning process itself. Hell, even how I chose to structure this meditation is bound to unsatisfying headings that continue to confine my narrative too neatly. Nonetheless, my own meditation is exactly that: “my own.” I could not endeavor here to explore the totality of COVID-19’s effect on collective experiences of mental illness. This piece is not written to offer any neatly packaged analysis or conclusion beyond one of presenting what is one account of grappling with mental illness in the solitary, quiet, alienated confinement in an anxious COVID-19 world. I think of the “healthier” place in my mental health journey that I reside in today. The experience of that winter helped me embrace tensions in all areas of my life—instead of running away from them.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648> >; Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996). ↩
2. La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press). ↩

Author Information



Caroline He

Caroline He is a David C. and Thelma Driskell research fellow and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. She holds an MLS degree from the University of Michigan in Library and Archival Science, where she was an IMLS Research Fellow, and a BA from Vanderbilt University in Anthropology and Asian Studies. Her research focuses on Afro-Asian studies, comparative race and ethnic studies, digital studies, popular culture, fan studies, diaspora, and media studies. She has published and presented on topics in K-pop, Chinese boy-love literature, digital archiving, and Chinatown food studies. She is also trained within material cultures, digital and historical preservation, and oral history.

[View all of Caroline He's articles.](#)

Article details

Caroline He, "600 mg of Lithium, Quarantine, and 'Third-Spaces'," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.12>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

For Graduate Students, When the Sadness is Unbelievable: How to Research and Write If We Must When the World is on Fire

by Kim Fernandes | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT This essay is a meditation on the place of grief in graduate student life, an accounting for the ways that the pandemic has shaped research and the work that disabled graduate students have had to do to stay afloat. I begin by meandering through the grief of a family bereavement into the range of other kinds of crip grief that emerged at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thinking with grief across scales, I ask the following questions: what might it mean to research and to write when our fields of inquiry shift even as they are being studied? How might we hold on to hope as a political practice even as undercurrents of grief work to wash it away? Where and how might we find and work with methodologies and practices that prioritize our embodied experiences during precarious, difficult times? Drawing on Melissa Kapadia's work on chronic illness methodology and Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe's manifesto for patchwork ethnography, I attend to the place of patchwork as a survival strategy for and beyond field research. Ultimately, this essay works with grief's non-linearity, patching together memories and experiences to document one experience of the early years of the pandemic as means of making the aloneness of our graduate journeys less commonplace.

KEYWORDS disability, grief, memory, methodology, research, COVID-19, graduate students

I'm in a cab on my way home from a meeting when I get a phone call from a number I've never seen before. The caller, a friend of one of my research participants, is angry, bothered by my unwillingness to RSVP for a mentorship event that he'd emailed about. Before I can tell him that I am in a flare and don't have the capacity to do another thing right now, he adds, "Since morning I've been calling people to tell them to come for the panel, and two people now have told me their relatives have died. You are not going to use that excuse also, are you?"

I hang up, without explanation, suddenly unable to breathe without effort. My mind feels entirely separate from my body. I see myself sitting in the cab but am unable to stop myself

from wondering how the world can go on amidst the thickness of loss. There's something about this dismissal that has sucked the air out of me in a way I didn't expect it to. Half an hour later, I am home and lying in bed, still shaken, trying to be as gentle with myself as I can before I open my laptop.

My dad texts just then, a country away and never one for casual conversation:

Hello, some very sad news. {}¹ Uncle just died about half an hour ago.

I text back:

What do you mean died?

{ } uncle is my dad's little brother, I repeat to myself, and there's no way he, a decade and some years younger than my father, and loved beyond words, could have died.

There is no response to my text.

I pick at my lips. My leg won't stop bouncing.

I text again:

Are you sure he died?

There is still no response. I am not sure who else to call to ask this bizarre set of questions: did my uncle really die? How could someone we held so dear just up and leave? I call my dad, our disbelief shared, his mind already on the logistics of a funeral.

I remember nothing else from that time because there is no time to remember. In grief my memory stays disappeared. What use is memory, without the language for it? More often than I can name, I have felt silly, overwhelmingly small, trying to explain the enormity of this (then singular) loss—*my uncle died* is usually met with a *I'm so sorry to hear*. There are no days off except for those that have rituals, and there are no rituals that I want to do then for my uncle. I want the space to grieve, but I don't know what that space looks like.

Where everyone has so many uncles that the word does not seem as singular as father, I am without the words to say that he was really another parent. Every language of grief is specific, and I cannot find a home in any one of them.² A handful of days later, when I next sit down to write a grant application, I cannot find any words that I want to commit to paper. For my whole life I have written, word after word to make my way through sadness, each word furiously placing itself onto the page as a pathway to another world. But the sadness this time is too large for words, its contours deceptive in how they appear without prior notice. Unable to sit with it where it takes me, I try and throw myself into work. I am keenly aware that there is little room for crip time as grief time when I am already an ethnographer

on borrowed time, needing to do fieldwork for a certain number of months before I can return to the US to begin writing my dissertation.³

A month later, the pandemic arrives.⁴ I am horrified, but like so many others, also unaware then of what a pandemic could mean or how long it could stretch on for but hoping that it can't be as serious as it sounds. For the last of handful of years, working through the uncertain temporalities of a constellation of chronic illnesses has led to an expanding to-do list that I cannot bring myself to get to, the fatigue of trying to keep up with a pace that is rooted in an imagination of myself as close to able-bodied. I look at the things I have been pushing from one to-do list to another, putting aside now for days-months-years because I am unable to push past my fatigue and have not caught up after the funeral.

Immunocompromised and unable to leave my home during the sudden and severe COVID-19 lockdown, I vow that this will finally be the year I get to every last academic thing. Amid my unnamed panic I calm myself by imagining the days stretching in front of me, each one with a neat beginning and a neater end, not yet having known anyone who has been sick from COVID and not viscerally knowing how vastly bad it can get. Even when I cannot continue field research as I had planned during this time, I toy with the idea that perhaps this is the year—this hazy chunk of pandemic time—when I finally become what a graduate student is imagined to be, committed to my work, able to meet the department's expectations, producing the kinds of output that make for a glowing year-end self-evaluation.

I've just been feeling off, I write in my morning pages one day, *but there is no reason for me to continue feeling that way*. The words on the page stretch, a challenge, and when I look again, I cannot stand them anymore. This is not a challenge I want to take on, I decide, ripping up the page and putting the book away. Too sad to write, I let my morning page ritual drop. Each other piece of writing for graduate school, like this one, is mired in a grief-filled swamp, one where each memory meshes into the next, thrown up against linear time. All other kinds of grief pile up.

* * *

In this patchworked essay I think from grief, engaging with disabled graduate students' experiences of the pandemic to discuss what it might mean to hold work alongside grief alongside work. I do so through reflections on my own, specific experiences as an international doctoral student at a US university, and as someone who has been doing dissertation fieldwork outside of the US during the pandemic.⁵ In mid-2019, I arrived in Delhi, India, preparing for and engaging in ethnographic fieldwork over the next three years around the question of who comes to be officially counted as disabled, and under what

circumstances. My own disciplinary training had taught me to think of the work of an ethnographer as the work of physically “being there” in-person. However, as the pandemic began and raged on, although I continued to physically be in Delhi, I also had to work through some of the impossibilities of reconciling expectations for field research and writing with the realities of the pandemic across Delhi.

Ellen Samuels writes about crip time as grief time, “a time of loss and of the crushing undertow that accompanies loss.”⁶ She also names crip time for its insistence “that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push away from the body while also pushing beyond its limits.”⁷ Building on Samuels’ urge to think, listen, and write from grief has meant non-linearity in the telling and retelling of stories about [this] time, a set of fragmented memories that do not coalesce around a single stretch of linearity, narratives that meander alongside each. Inhabiting this mad border body is a series of disconnections, a brokenness that this essay too reflects.⁸ Writing from and meandering with my own grief has meant that this piece is a collection of threads; a set of overlapping narratives without a clear beginning and end; an accounting for the way we might best honor what it means to continue to live with this grief. It is the work of bringing together what we can remember to archive, while accepting how that which has been brought together on these pages is undeniably incomplete. Thinking from grief both as the result of a devastating personal loss and as a crip standpoint in my writing also means that this essay, like my mind, takes on much of the non-linearity of this grief. Despite the incompleteness of grief, I write this essay because I want it to exist in the world; therefore, although the stories in this essay are also an archive for other graduate students and other times of crisis, they are first—and always—evidence of the fullness that crip community facilitates.⁹ I also write with and about grief because none of us are strangers to grief, and because it has marked our lives in ways both known and not-yet-known.

My field research has also undoubtedly been shaped by grief, and I draw upon patchwork ethnography as both a theoretical and a methodological approach to talk about research and writing alongside devastation. As Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe write, patchwork ethnography allows for attention to “how ethnographic practices are being reshaped by researchers’ own lives and our multiple personal and professional commitments” in an attempt “to refigure what counts as knowledge and what does not.”¹⁰ Expanding this engagement with patchwork as a method to that of a survival strategy in impossible times, I reflect on the work of pushing through in the academy as a graduate student during a pandemic. To do so, I consider some of the many disruptions generated by grief, pandemic-related and otherwise, patching together in response a set of considerations for crip pandemic research life.

In my wandering through grief, graduate school, and survival during the pandemic, I was—and at the time of writing this essay, I am—still a student enrolled at a Global North university, doing fieldwork largely with disabled people and communities in a context where several of my participants have had far fewer opportunities to access healthcare resources than I do. Especially prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine, and in many instances, even after its rollout, this difference in our locations has meant that my participants' experiences of and engagements with risk are often substantially different than my own. Additionally, showing up from the body, as I describe above, has necessitated accounting for my bodymind as well as the bodyminds of my participants, for the ways that our collective presence (and interruptions) cannot be separated from our everyday lives as disabled people.¹¹

The academy's hegemonic, normative expectations have been a source of worry and fear well before the start of the pandemic—as a disabled, immunocompromised doctoral student, the presence of my body has been impossible to separate from the methods and design of my research. This was evident even during preliminary fieldwork, when I realized that there were days when I just couldn't hold my body together enough to physically show up for the kinds of in-person being and doing that mark many classic ethnographies. The doing of ethnography was not designed for a body like mine, one that cannot sit or stand for hours at a stretch without debilitating stiffness and pain afterward. In preparing to start fieldwork, I grieved what could have been, even before the pandemic had begun: what might it have looked like for my dissertation project to have a bodymind that could? Alongside this, since I knew viscerally and with increasing certainty that my bodymind couldn't, I read anything that I could lay my hands on by other disabled researchers.¹² This was partly to plan for that which I could not have possibly fully anticipated, but also to reassure myself that being a disabled researcher was not impossible.

When the pandemic first hit, my participants and I moved all our previous in-person interactions online. Against the severity of the COVID-19 lockdown between March and June 2020, our conversations on medium and/as method also expanded to thinking about what would happen when the lockdown ended, and when we were free to leave our homes without requiring the same kinds of permissions that we then did. Overwhelmingly, my participants pointed out that they'd like to remain online, that meeting in-person was too great a risk for them to take.

A few months into the pandemic, having wrestled daily with trying to work in offline ethnographic interactions and being unable to find any ethical ways to do so, I started to name that the remainder of my dissertation fieldwork would be online. I did so both

because I was concerned about contagion and the (closely resultant, if not inevitable) grief that might follow—selfishly, I had no room in my heart for another loss, even though this was not something I could control. Ethically, as I considered all of what it might be like to move between sites, both for myself and my participants, I was also acutely aware that this would mean potentially increasing my participants' exposure and my own significantly through in-person interactions. Although I had only just begun to conduct in-person fieldwork for a few months before the pandemic arrived, this fieldwork consisted largely of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews. Since all of these interactions had previously happened in person, moving fieldwork online also meant that I no longer had field sites defined by their physical location, but rather by considerations of internet bandwidth and the accessibility of media and communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Meet, and Zoom. The spatiotemporal fieldsites that I then had access to online were significantly different than the ones that I had intended to observe in person. Through this replacement—not just of one set of field sites with another, or of the in-person with the online, but also of a previous, tenuous normal with a newer, shakier one—I experienced a complicated matrix of grief at what could have been and fear at what might be.

* * *

The specific uncertainty of expectations from around the moment that the pandemic hits is replayed many times after in our lives, stretching out across the months that follow. As graduate students, we're supposed to be adjusting to this "new normal" but no one has any firm idea what an appropriate kind of adjustment should look like. In speaking with other doctoral students at similar stages, I am struck by how we find ourselves limited by the ways our institutional locations shape the duration and requirements for our fieldwork or other original research toward the dissertation. Once amidst the process, though—whatever that looks like for each of us—we implode with worry: are we doing enough? Is online data collection ever going to be a sufficient replacement for what we had hoped we could hold on to in person?

Among the many conversations about institutional responses to the pandemic, none seem to address what the university's expectations of graduate students were—or will be—like for those of us whose "in-person" was not typical to begin with. I say this, too, not so much to argue that there were no conversations whatsoever about what it might look like for (both disabled and normate) graduate students to be doing fieldwork during a pandemic, at a distance from their personal and institutional support systems. Instead, I want to note that institution-led conversations about what graduate students could—and should—do toward making the progress that our institutions continued to expect for degree completion

did not include discussions of how intertwined and collectively precarious the work of in-person research looked like as the pandemic raged on.

As each early COVID wave rises and then falls, over the months of starting, and stopping, and starting fieldwork again in 2020 and early 2021, I am acutely cognizant that the work of field research is not fragmented simply because of the pandemic, or because my crip bodymind cannot match up to an assumption that continuous physical presence is the only way to gain ethnographic thickness.¹³ In writing my fieldnotes, I begin to refuse the notion of work online being thought of as not-whole, as fragmented, realizing that this framing of the online as second-best is subtle in its emphasis that there is one normative (i.e., usually in-person) way to do ethnographic work. Centering an ethic of care—for and from the researcher and our participants—is also centering the ways that our research participants may choose to participate in ways that are different than they might otherwise have prior to COVID, to leave the room necessary for their own bodyminds to respond to the pandemic unfolding. Doing ethnographic work that centers disability during a mass disabling event, therefore, is not necessarily doing work that is fragmented by design; rather, I understand it as a concerted commitment to considering how this specific kind of wholeness in research might actually be the kind of work that is attentive to our bodyminds.

For months I wrestle with what it means to consider this on-again, off-again, shaped-by-the-COVID-waves nature of fieldwork, what it is to try and follow the field to where it leads me, even when the field is uncertain and difficult. As I think with patchwork ethnography, I wonder, does the presence of the idea of patchwork imply that there is an implicit opposite, a kind of wholeness in fieldwork that remains the ideal? In *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Eli Clare writes of the promise of wholeness and its intersections with cure: “Cure promises wholeness, even as the world pokes and prods, reverberating beneath our skin, a broken world giving rise to broken selves.”¹⁴ Clare’s recognition of the simultaneous dichotomy of refusing brokenness while also recognizing being “profoundly broken” is one that remains firm in its emphasis on the imperfect nature of wholeness.¹⁵

The question of whether in-person fieldwork is more desirable than online fieldwork has been addressed through numerous debates about ethnographic methods and subsequent writing that has arisen during the pandemic. This discourse also speaks to the question of why in-person fieldwork is often presumed to be the more accurate, richer source of data when compared to online fieldwork. An assumption that there will be a return to a pre-pandemic normal of sorts often underlies many such debates, particularly ones that consider the online as a placeholder till more work can be done in person. This implicit framing of the virtual as somehow less desirable than the in-person, more fragmented and less complete than what ethnographic work would otherwise have been, then invariably paints the online as a space of brokenness, a space that cannot be thought of as whole

despite the depth of lives that are lived in virtual space. What is often absent in these discussions of the fieldwork medium is the question of what works for the researcher's body, of how we as researchers might work to make our own research accessible to ourselves.

I think of what this means for conventional ethnographic work, especially when it imagines continuity in time spent in the field as a form of wholeness. By extension, within this framing, work fragmented by time and other circumstances comes to be seen as patching together a whole, rather than a whole in itself. To think of these questions while doing pandemic fieldwork, however, is not to say that they have never been considered by anthropologists before; as the "Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography" notes, the framing of patchwork is a way to acknowledge and accommodate numerous efforts that researchers have already been making across personal-professional lives that are non-linear and imperfect. Here, I write through my own grappling as yet another way to make meaning of work that is fragmented and brought together by grief on the field.

* * *

In "Illness Methodology for the COVID-19 Era and Beyond," Melissa Kapadia describes the place of chronic illness methodology as "an embodied set of practices that centers the ill researcher and their needs."¹⁶ As they think from and with the body, they offer a set of questions as a starting point through wherein the goal is "not to 'get through' the COVID-19 age and return to our old ways of knowing and doing, but rather to engage a mindset that centers illness epistemologies even when able-bodied researchers are not affected by a global pandemic."¹⁷ Of significance to the reflections in this essay, and to my own decisions during fieldwork, are the following questions that they pose to researchers (both able-bodied and disabled) conducting fieldwork during the COVID era: "In what ways do I impose my class, ability, race etc. experiences on my participants? For example, do I assume that if they are to get sick while participating in my study, they will have easy access to health care? Do I assume they will have access to technologies, free time, travel, vocabulary, and other needs required for this participation?"¹⁷

Kapadia's questions about what it means to work centers and emerges from a knowledge of one's body—and the bodies of one's participants—have also shaped the shifts in how and when I have collected data, making room for pauses when COVID waves surge. Thinking with questions from chronic illness methodology has encouraged me to think more carefully about what constitutes "enough" data from which to write a thesis. These shifts have also meant a change in how I would have otherwise tried to structure interviews that asked about when and how people felt their disabilities came to matter. For months, I

sat with my own noticing of occasions when it was not appropriate to bring up or reference older trauma, leaving room instead for the thickness of shared grief. On numerous occasions, this shift in what the interview could be also meant that interviews did not happen in a single thirty to forty-five minute block, requiring both my participants and I to be present online at the same time. Instead, as some of my participants have gently suggested, imploding in our grief together and separately has allowed us to meander during the interview, with short voice notes that ask questions, and longer voice notes that answer them. Making room for embodied research has meant, too, that in moments of disbelief, I turn to saving tweets as a method, holding on to them as evidence that despite widespread denial within national news media, the pandemic was indeed as severe as we experienced it being.

Reshaping the contours of my project has also been a reminder of the intersections between disability justice and the ethical considerations that underlie fieldwork: the bulk of decisions on what constitutes safe research behaviors during this time have been made at the level of the individual researcher, rather than by/through a set of guidelines from the university or the state. As I worked through what kinds of research might prioritize the safety of my participants, I also worked from the recognition that the state had abandoned many of its citizens—especially those with multiply marginalized identities—and that our first priorities are to care for ourselves and each other as the pandemic rages on. Sometimes—most times—prioritizing care meant prioritizing for grief, and for the kinds of horrendous situations where words fall short. This prioritization of care, in addition to moving online, also meant doing less altogether, including less research than planned.

* * *

In the long days that follow the initial arrival of the pandemic, my body starts to come undone. I am certain I don't have COVID—there's no way I would, since I literally haven't left the house for six months—but what then are these symptoms? My head is too heavy to move. I start conversations and can't remember where they are going, often fueled by an urgency in my head but only later realizing I may have struck up a conversation with the wrong person. I wake up in the middle of the night, sweaty and feverish, shaking, and text a friend: if not COVID, maybe this is some other exotic illness? She laughs: *no, stop trying to figure it out and just give yourself a break, you've had a really awful year.*

Even as I try to keep myself afloat enough to do fieldwork, I push through one grief after another, each thickly layered and oftentimes seemingly impenetrable. I think again of what it might mean to have done fieldwork at a different time, and of how different my dissertation would have looked then. However, other things emerge that my research

participants and I have to negotiate together, such as the question of exposure and safety. For those participants who are exposed to the virus on account of having jobs that require them to return to in-person work, what might it look like to acknowledge competing access needs? We work through these situations many times over, in one-on-one conversations and across groups, each time testing the waters of what feels safe as numbers rise and fall, and as the definition of essential tasks shifts in the time between one wave and another. Even without a pandemic, graduate school is a time thick with uncertainty, this thickness growing as the pandemic continues.

For close to three months between April and early June 2021 there is a horrendous second wave of COVID-19 in India. It makes its way into everything. I am afraid to look at my WhatsApp, once a platform that I'd named as a crucial field location. Every message that comes in, across group chats and other individual interactions I've had, asks about the availability of beds, of oxygen cylinders, of medication, of COVID tests, of food, of anything that could possibly save another life during this time. Running a mutual aid network, peers and I all feel ill-equipped to make any of these decisions about who should get access to resources when resources are so scarce. My parents are in another country and ostensibly safe, but I cannot bring myself to shut my eyes and fall into sleep. I do not want to know any of the news, and I cannot miss a single second of updates. I mourn, over and over, each person—most of whom I don't know—whose death is noted online. Seemingly positive, hopeful stories emerge occasionally on social media, perhaps as a reminder that death may not be entirely inevitable even as ambulance sirens go off in the background all day, all night. I scream into my pillow when everything is too much, because even these positive stories about a single life saved are heartbreaking, angering, unbelievable. In those months, I have no memory, either. In the ones that follow I find myself unable to spend any time on WhatsApp or Twitter that is without a deep anxiety. I am always searching for another message, an early warning about the horrendous arrival of a wave.

By June 2021, the monstrous second wave has somewhat subsided. In the long summer mornings after the wave, my body throbs with pain. For months, the pain refuses to go away. Through hot water and stretches and naps at every point in the day, it returns when I am awake, unblinking. Some time after it has inhabited me, it becomes something I inhabit—I am going to get work done, no matter what, I tell myself. I plod back to work, my head spinning when I think of all I need to do to simply get through the day. I do not resume fieldwork, because I cannot. I am weighed down by what it means to do a dissertation, about who gets counted as dead amidst mass death, about processes of disablement amidst widespread, ongoing, relentless disablement. I'm too afraid of someone asking me, *So what happened? Where did you go?*, and of the possibility that they might laugh at my crumbling heart, might doubt that my body had gone to hell. Each Zoom event is a soft return, as I try and cheer myself on, a reminder that I am one step closer to being the

engaged ethnographer. But after a couple of months, when I push myself to return to collecting data about whose lives count, and how they are made to count, my camera is still off every time, my microphone muted. Often, I disconnect from the event audio entirely. For someone who anticipates writing a lot toward making a living, not having any of the right words has felt like the end of my career, of my life, and most starkly of my mind as I knew it, even as the silences are the only place that feel startlingly expansive.

* * *

I am no stranger to grief. I have accumulated every flavor, some that I didn't even know were available.

The big griefs: almost seven years ago, my best friend died by suicide, an event that I am now able to talk about as the reason I left a job in India and moved halfway across the world to begin a PhD in America. But I am extremely unable to talk about anything around that time, to revisit the restaurant where I first received a phone call asking me if I had heard from her in the last day or two. Through the pandemic I have lost other friends and family, unable to say goodbye across distance, unwilling to let myself process this accumulation of profound loss.

The medium ones: when the second wave of COVID hits in India, I'm in touch with people I had maybe only spoken to once before, each time trying to find oxygen or a bed. More often than I want to count, I have sent across a resource and already known it was too late. Sometimes loved ones have written back to say that the person for whom this resource was meant has already passed, and my mind has started to grieve people I never knew.

And the little ones: for years, I have cried when I read novels where the main character loses a father and no longer knows how to cope, anticipating already the grief that will come rushing in when it is my turn. Each time someone posts about the loss of a beloved pet on a Facebook group, I tear up, although I am severely allergic to lots of things and will never have any pets of my own, knowing that this is just my grief in another, more palatable bucket, a kind of aesthetically acceptable softness.

* * *

This reflection on and writing about the work of patching together as a survival tactic during a period of prolonged grief is taking place against the backdrop of many North American universities' decisions to return to almost entirely in-person learning and to stop tracking COVID numbers. Saddened by the dwindling virtual options, a friend notes that to

insist aggressively on this kind of normal is to deny all of the grief we collectively hold. In March 2020, the initial pandemic response by many universities emphasizes a willingness to think of the old normal as attainable, a set of careful guidelines that indicate when we will be ready to return to what we had before: first, a move online, then, a few months later, a contemplation of what kinds of hybrid learning are safely possible if everyone agrees to uphold some form of a campus contract. From that time, I collect emails that acknowledge the collective fragility of the human community and the reminder that our lives as we know it will be different. The expectations for the kind of work that are to be carried out in fulfillment of our degrees, however, rarely changes—instead, a plethora of alternatives emerge, each suggesting how online access to archives, grey literature, YouTube videos from years past, and numerous other sources might now replace the kinds of work that hanging out in-person would make possible. Another friend remarks, early on in the pandemic, about the unchanging nature of our degree requirements: *they expect us to do the same kind of work that we did pre-COVID, as if there was no COVID, even when they tell us there is still COVID.*

Often—and especially during this pandemic—official guidelines about when and how we might work to keep each other safe, to uphold the campus contract that is often invoked, no longer center safety in a way that prioritizes consent and a calculus of interpersonal risk, putting many of us as graduate students instead in situations where we are required to make individual decisions about how to keep ourselves safe. Against this backdrop of denial generated by the push to return to normal, even the work of affirming that the pandemic continues across the world can feel like a colossal amount of work, an active, uphill affirmation against abandonment: we are all we have. When the kinds of normal we long for do not match the ones we're told to want, we can—and we are—building our own.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Rocky Fernandes, Melissa Kapadia, Jiya Pandya, Srinidhi Raghavan, Kritivasas Shukla, and Sonaksha for thinking alongside me at various stages of the writing of this piece. Jiya Pandya read an early draft and offered generous, incisive comments that allowed me to keep writing. Srinidhi Raghavan and Sonaksha have waded through the weeds with me on more occasions than I can imagine, their encouragement to keep going gentle but never lacking in conviction. Melissa Kapadia has written chronic illness methodology into being and woven it into every conversation we have had over the last seven years, and I am more grateful for their softness than I could ever say. Kritivasas Shukla has held our lives together through the heartbreak on this page and beyond it, sharing sadness while also—always—looking for ways to make it more bearable. Rocky Fernandes has made this journey one of gentleness and care, and my writing is heavily

indebted to his expansive, audacious hope. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their sharp and encouraging comments, and to Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas for their supportive, careful feedback and unsparing patience.

Notes

1. Here, in choosing not to name my uncle, or to provide more concrete details about his age and other aspects of his and our family's lives, I borrow from Laura Khoudari's practice of naming her trauma story through the following marks: {}. As Khoudari notes in *Lifting Heavy Things*, doing so is a means to make room for "the healing quality of space, as represented typographically by these brackets and in the form of a compassionate pause—an allowance to go slow or even stop"; Laura Khoudari, *Lifting Heavy Things: Healing Trauma One Rep At A Time* (Los Angeles, CA: LifeTree Media, 2021), 14. In using these marks, it is my hope to be able to separate somewhat the context of the story and its traumatic aftermath from the details I know so closely. ↩
2. My work to find the words for grief in a shapeless time has been influenced too by Jessie Male's thinking and writing about grief in memory in the fall issue of *Crip Pandemic Life*. Jessie Male, "How Do You Grieve During An Apocalypse?" *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2022): <https://csalateral.org/section/crip-pandemic-life/how-do-you-grieve-during-an-apocalypse-male> < <https://csalateral.org/section/crip-pandemic-life/how-do-you-grieve-during-an-apocalypse-male/> > . ↩
3. In my own sense-making of the ways that crip time and grief time shape each other, I owe an enormous debt to Ellen Samuels for her essay, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> < <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> > . ↩
4. Although the first reported cases of COVID-19 in China were at the very end of 2019, I refer here to the arrival of the pandemic in India in broader public consciousness as first marked by the 14-hour voluntary lockdown (also known as the *Janata Curfew*) on Sunday, March 22, 2020. Subsequently, on March 24, 2020, with less than four hours' notice, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown until April 14, which continued for seventy-five days. For a full timeline of the early days of COVID-19 in India, see "Half a Million COVID-19 Cases in India: How We Got To Where We Are," *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/covid-19-india-timeline> < <https://thewire.in/covid-19-india-timeline> > . ↩
5. I name my fieldwork location—Delhi—as outside of the US, rather than as home or abroad, in part to locate myself physically as against/in relation to the university's expectations of the graduate student as a worker. In my writing, I also do not refer to a specific university; instead, I use "the university" as an amalgam, a patchworked composite of responses that universities have provided through the course of the pandemic, and an acknowledgement that this discussion on the role of the university in responding to the pandemic is inextricably located within broader systemic, oppressive patterns and behaviors that are embedded within higher education. ↩
6. Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." ↩
7. Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." ↩
8. Shayda Kafai, "Memory Seeking: Mad Phenomenology as Orientation," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 3, no. 4 (2020). Kafai defines the mad border body as "a third positionality," one that is "an alternative to the sane/mad construction," and "an attempt to undo the absoluteness of these categories." ↩
9. On her blog, Mia Mingus writes, "We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other...Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live — past survival; past isolation." *Leaving Evidence*, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2> < <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/about-2> > . With immense gratitude, this essay follows Mingus's call. ↩

10. Gökce Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe, "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," *Member Voices, Fieldsights*, June 9, 2020, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> < <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> > . ↵
 11. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–284; Samantha Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018). ↵
 12. Although this note cannot do justice to the range of readings I encountered, I attempt to note here some that significantly shaped my own thinking and doing of research. This list includes, but is certainly not limited to, Vandana Chaudhry, "Knowing Through Tripping: A Performative Praxis for Co-Constructing Knowledge As A Disabled Halfie," *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (2018): 70–82; Arseli Dokumaci, "Disability As Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism Through Media Creation," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2018); Arseli Dokumaci, "People As Affordances: Building Disability Worlds Through Care Intimacy," *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S21 (2020); Erin L. Durban, "Anthropology and Ableism," *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 1 (2022): 8–20; Cara E. Jones, "The Pain of Endo Existence: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies of Endometriosis," *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Crip, Queer* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Alison Kafer, "Unsafe Disclosures Scenes of Disability and Trauma," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016); Aparna Nair, "Like Bananas with Brown Spots: Epilepsy, Embodiment, Vulnerability and Resilience in South Asia," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 4 (2019): 169–194; Alyson Patsavas, "Recovering a Cripistemology of Pain: Leaky Bodies, Connective Tissue, and Feeling Discourse," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014); Rine Vieth, "Dis/Ability to Do Fieldwork," *The New Ethnographer*, October 4, 2018; Susan Wendell, "Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities," *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001). ↵
 13. In his 1973 article, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes of thick description as one of the hallmarks of the ethnographic method of research, wherein the researcher is not only paying close and careful attention to the behaviors, practices, and processes that they encounter while on the field but is also prioritizing in their analysis and writing the meanings and intentions embedded in these behaviors. Within and beyond anthropology, thickness in ethnographic description is prized as a hallmark of deep engagement. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) ↵
 14. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 158. ↵
 15. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 159. ↵
 16. Melissa Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era," *Perspectives on Urban Education* 18, no. 1 (2020): <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/illness-methodology-and-beyond-covid-era> < <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/illness-methodology-and-beyond-covid-era> > . ↵
 17. Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era." ↵
 18. Kapadia, "Illness Methodology For and Beyond the COVID Era." ↵
-

Author Information



Kim Fernandes

Kim Fernandes is a PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development (Education) and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. As a researcher, writer, and educator, they are primarily interested in disability, technology, and data. Their doctoral research focuses specifically on the politics and processes of producing data about disability in India.

[View all of Kim Fernandes's articles.](#)

Article details

Kim Fernandes, "For Graduate Students, When the Sadness is Unbelievable: How to Research and Write If We Must When the World is on Fire," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.13>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

The Place and Pace to Remember: Keeping What the Pandemic Has Given Us

by Ria (Ariana) DasGupta, Liz Lopez and Emily A. Nusbaum

| Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT We begin with the question “what do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?” Largely co-written in 2021, this reflexive essay serves as a snapshot in time, at one stage of the pandemic, reflecting upon earlier, shared experiences at one institution of higher education. We locate each of our identities and positionalities in that space and beyond. Our essay uses Moya Bailey’s 2021 discussion of an ethics of pace to frame our thinking and collective memory work and to counter what we identified as the distinct efforts of institutions of higher education to not have places for institutional memory. We articulate that without memory places, it is impossible to build both a history of justice work in institutions of higher education and accountability that this justice work is seen through. And we ask, how are we to build justice and healing in higher education when the place is designed so that we can’t remember things, and when there seems to be a goal to not have institutional memory that remembers how, why, and by whom justice work is done? We answer the question: “what do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?” with this: “the pace and place to remember.”

KEYWORDS disability, ethics, time, narrative, justice, higher education, pandemic

[Content warning: This article mentions suicidal ideation.]

Context

We are three individuals/friends, each variously located in relation to academia. At one point in time (2016–2019), we were all at one institution together, and we collaborated/did organizing/programming around access and academic ableism. While we are no longer at that institution, this reflective and conversational piece is a site of memory work that vitally preserves and reanimates some of what we were working towards.

We begin with the question “What do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?” We answer with “the pace and place to remember,” because we came to understand that our collective memory work around our work with the late Stacey Park Milbern, over the course of the time that we were writing this, is in itself a site of disability culture and disability justice work.

Largely cowritten in 2021, this reflective piece itself serves as a snapshot in time, at one stage of the pandemic, reflecting upon earlier experiences. All authors are lead/co-authors. We worked collaboratively, fluidly, collectively, and interdependently. Our names appear in alphabetical order.

Introduction

What do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?

The question itself seems ludicrous. Don’t we want to forget that any of this happened? Don’t we want to go back to “normal”? Don’t we all just want this to end?

When the three of us looked back and tried to answer this question, we couldn’t do so without bringing the late Stacey Park Milbern, a visionary and leader for disability justice, into our collective memory. When we thought about the time we had with Park Milbern—reckoning with and organizing around ableism in academia—the year before the pandemic started, and the year before she passed, we realized that what the pandemic has given us, more than anything, is *place and pace*. Place to keep asking questions and a place for reflection that we have been strangely gifted during this time, and the pace with which to do it.

In this collective essay, we take up Moya Bailey’s 2021 discussion of an ethics of pace to helpfully frame our thinking. We believe such a framework will benefit the continued mission to create greater access and inclusion of our multiply-marginalized, disabled community members. In her 2021 essay entitled “The Ethics of Pace,” Bailey writes, “The ethic of pace I want moving forward in my life and in my academic work is a slow and sustainable pace, one that moves at the speed of trust and is not driven by capitalistic imperatives.”¹ This desire to move through academia with a slow and sustainable pace resounded for us, given our own bodymind experiences and identities in academia.

We first encountered and began to reckon with the notion of pace in relation to academia through a February 2019 capacity-building event with Park Milbern, titled “Leaving No Body Behind: Accessibility as a Practice of Revolutionary Imagination.” Collaborating to organize and welcome Park Milbern to the institution where we previously worked gave us

the context to deepen our relationships with one another as colleagues, but more importantly as trusted friends. The motivation to continue our collaborative energies moved us then to discuss our disability justice advocacy in academia in October 2019 through a National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) session titled "Disability justice in the Academy: Is Transformation Possible?" Now we are here, as we collectively write out what the pandemic has given us. The pandemic conversations through Zoom video calls and an ongoing group text thread granted us the opportunity to reflect on our past organizing efforts that included Park Milbern's impactful presentation and our NWSA session.

In this essay, we weave our experiences and memory work for authentic and honest conversation to answer the original question that prompted this collaborative piece, "What do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?" This collective essay mirrors the nature of our colleague-friend relationship and interdependence across our positionalities, roles, and experiences. This essay is an opportunity for us to connect through a means that does not feel like work, but an opportunity to pause and reflect within the hegemonic capitalist structure we coexist within, and that continuously forces us to separate the body from the mind.

Our conversations happened when they could: when we had time, when we wanted, and when we felt up to it. When we came together, it became a place of remembering. Our memory work, unfolding in the conversation below, remembers and questions. How do we build justice when we don't have places to remember? We took note that in our places—all tied together by higher education—there seems to be a goal to not have institutional memory that remembers how, why, and by whom justice work is done. Without memory places, how do we build both a history of justice work and accountability in higher education that this justice work is seen through? How are we to build justice and healing in higher education when the place is designed so that we can't remember things? How do we transform higher education when it's clear that people are disposable in it, when we have no place to process what we have lost, and we have to start again, and again, and again from scratch? We know that our questions are not ones that can be answered, but rather we hope our desires for justice and healing in higher education, contrasted with the willful forgetting of higher education, will document the violence that is enacted on each of us through this process.

What do we want to keep, that the pandemic has given us?

The place to and the pace with which to remember.

Places to Reflect on “The Pace of Our Work” in Higher Education

When we came together, the three of us found ourselves reflecting on pre-pandemic experiences with Park Milbern that had given us the language and tools to make sense of this peri-pandemic time. In particular, we remembered the above-mentioned 2019 workshop led by Park Milbern, “Leaving No Body Behind: Accessibility as a Practice of Revolutionary Imagination” and a panel that the three of us subsequently organized with Park Milbern for the National Women’s Studies Association conference in San Francisco that November entitled “Our Collective Ethnography: Disability Justice and the Academy. Is Transformation Possible?” These two places gave us a foundation to think and dream about pace in the context of higher education, and we do so by holding our “critical relationships” that challenge us to imagine new realities in higher education.² In her 2019 workshop, Park Milbern’s description and framing of ableism in the academy completely reoriented our individual perspectives and relationships to academia. Park Milbern gifted us with the idea of *the pace of our work* with the following discussion:

So what a lot of disability justice activists have been doing [is] to challenge our culture and expectation around even the pace of our work. So for example, if we are working with direct action organizers, we have been asking people to have disabled people and elders in the front of the march, leading the march so that the whole march is going at the pace of the slowest walker. Because at Berkeley what has happened the march goes really fast and people get left behind and then the people who are left behind are kind of left alone to deal with the cops. So, we want to ensure safety for everyone by everyone moving at the same pace as a group. We can think about that on campuses too.³

Thinking with Bailey’s 2021 essay alongside Park Milbern’s 2019 comments reminds us that in our universities, the pace of production is set by the unreachable standards of capitalism, and that it is easy to fall behind in higher education when the goal is unrealistic and inhumane. Reflecting on this example from Park Milbern together with Bailey’s observation about capitalism’s “seemingly unquestioned ethos to make us produce more and faster,”⁴ we reflect on how in higher education, too, those of us who question or challenge this capitalist pace of production are punished, sidelined, made to feel lesser than—in many ways, “left alone to deal with the cops.”⁵

Citing Wendell, Bailey reminds us that it is capitalism itself that constructs disability, making “disability where there was none because of our need for speed.”⁶ If disability is socially constructed by the workings of capitalism, so too can we construct places to challenge its impact in higher education, and establish an ethics of pace, our pace, human pace. Together, it seems like we can sculpt the world that Park Milbern fought to bring into

existence, if we are able to challenge our communities and our institutions to create places to reflect deeply on the “pace of our work.”

Emily

I've tried many, many, many times to sit down and write this. I've wanted to write about this—our knowing one another and our collective attempt to create something vibrant, alive, and accountable as Liz, Ria, and I tried to intervene on our campus via the work of Park Milbern and other disability justice leaders. It seems like another world when we collaborated and grew to know and care about one another and our shared vision and hope for the institution where we worked. Each time I've tried to write about what we shared, thoughts of “What Was Happening” in February 2019, the time when our efforts were culminating, have filled me, refiring the neural pathways that trauma creates and that lead to panic and freezing.² I remember texting Liz and Ria one of the times that I tried to sit down and write this piece—that I needed to reframe this writing together “as an act of love and resistance to all that is toxic and drains us,” versus being “work” (words and understanding that emerged in one of our text threads). And so it is with this love that I also remember, and by remembering, bring back into existence our relationship and previous, collective efforts to learn from and with disability justice scholars/creators like Park Milbern. I've tried to ground myself in some of the principles of disability justice while writing this piece together, as Liz, Ria, and I have practiced interdependence, of lifting and carrying one another, of centering the needs of whomever seemed to be struggling the most, and as each of us has had varying constraints on our lives (COVID, providing familial support, parental death, and work instability and unsustainability). In this way, my writing here becomes a healing story. I hope. And the story of our kinship that is both alive and that also exists in memory.

I remember the feeling of such relief—profound relief washing over me—when Park Milbern came to campus for this event in February 2019. Although I understood the term *ableism*—I have experienced ableism, and I teach about and name ableism—considering what this could look like across so many different campus spaces was something so many in the room with us that day never thought of before. Park Milbern's voice and the profound, critical, and essential words about disability, access, collective support, and interdependence filled and blanketed me with relief and comfort. Even in the midst of What Was Happening, being in that room, listening to and learning from Park Milbern, and with those people on campus who provided safety and care, made me believe in possibility.

It was later in the spring of 2019 that we proposed a panel with Park Milbern to the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) annual conference, which was being held in San Francisco the following fall. We wanted to explore, from each of our positions, the question

“is disability justice in the academy really possible?” Park Milbern’s writing framed our reflection around that question, which we collectively wrote (and dared to dream) in our panel abstract:

The heart of any critically-oriented effort is the interrogation of who society values (or doesn’t) and why, and which bodyminds experience autonomy, mobility, resource, and safety, and which do not. An analysis of ableism, racism, and classism is necessary for this, and yet many diversity efforts at post-secondary institutions dismiss these systemic understandings, missing that much of the violence communities of color face is not only racist, but ableist at its core. We are experimenting with “cripping the campus,” primarily by centering disabled people of color and doing the fundamental internal change work needed to transform an academy hostile to us.⁸

In the fall of 2019 (a few months prior to the pandemic lockdowns across the world), our NWSA panel also articulated concepts such as “diversity as a strategy,” versus an endpoint. Liz’s words from our panel stayed with me throughout much of the early pandemic, as *What Was Happening* was still unfolding.⁹ She had said, “Perhaps liberation starts with each member of society committing themselves to the liberation of all people—to provide tangible resources and acknowledge the beauty and resiliency within the communities we are a part of and are advocating for.”

Even with the tremendous loss of life around the globe, which highlighted the structural inequities experienced by multiply-marginalized, disabled people, the lockdown orders began a period of healing for me, as everyone, except essential workers, needed to stay home. In March of 2020, I began volunteering for the Disability Justice Culture Club (DJCC)—a local mutual-aid group founded by Park Milbern—with the “power to live” campaign during gas/electricity shut-offs and wildfires in the fall of 2019.¹⁰ Throughout the pandemic the DJCC paired volunteers with multiply-marginalized, disabled elders. Throughout the eighteen months I volunteered for the DJCC, while I provided food shopping, prescription pick-up, and delivery for households that included disabled, BIPOC, and elders, I was struck by the privilege of what I was experiencing with *What Was Happening* in the broader context of trauma and loss everywhere.

It is difficult for me to use words to describe the memory work taking place between Liz, Ria, and me as we come together on Zoom, in text, and on these pages. I know that what I experience, remembering here—as I type, delete, insert comments, or send a text asking for gentle feedback—is a form of justice. It allows me to come back to the question posed earlier—“is disability justice in the academy really possible?”—and consider that perhaps the answer could be yes, if only our institutions allowed for the place and pace to remember.

As I come back to our memory work here—revising and editing even months after we began—I’m struck by the ways in which our institutions specifically work in ways that force us to forget. I have joined the ranks of contingent faculty over the last three years, a position that viscerally reflects our disposability within the work of the institution. I have tried to make financial ends meet by teaching thirteen courses for five different institutions during the 2021–2022 calendar year (in addition to creating/building a consulting business and other professional activities). I tell myself that I had some power because I was choosing what I would and would not teach (and am only teaching courses that allow me to center disability and its intersections across a range of contexts). But what I really am is exhausted in a way that I cannot describe. I loathe opening up my laptop each day (because I do need to work seven days a week if I am going to only survive), and I have not valued myself in the way that I want to. So how am I to have the place and pace to remember? Perhaps it is only by choosing to leave academic institutions of higher education entirely that I can find these places. Right now, I am not sure.

I used to believe that by placing disability within justice frameworks—or perhaps by framing justice within intersectional frameworks that center disability—we could work towards liberation in university places. Now, when I think about justice and the possibility of transformation, I know that having the place and pace to remember individually and collectively is necessary—and is almost an impossibility when enacting this work in university places. Instead, I/we must return to relationships—both individual and collective—that have sustained, nourished, and healed me/us. And this requires place and pace, is only created through place and pace. I am grateful that this collective essay is a place for relationship and interdependence; and has been shaped by a pace that is fluid and supportive, and that cares about each of us, from our various positions and experiences.

Liz

Park Milbern believed in direct action and subverting systems of oppression by all means necessary. She confronted police in marches and demonstrations and took to the streets using her bodymind to fight for disabled people, through the interconnected fight for housing rights, immigrant rights, and queer and trans liberation that is BIPOC led and centered.

While Park Milbern advocated for mutual aid organizing, she also was very critical of the fact that the mutual aid organization should not have to exist in the first place. It exists because there is not adequate support for disabled, elderly low-income BIPOC communities by the government entities. She states, “Disabled queer and trans people band-aiding infrastructure for community is NOT romantic. It is not #activistgoals. It means the system is failing. It means inaction and disregard are leaving people in harm’s way. It

means only those connected to our networks or finding resources themselves are getting what they need."¹¹ We rely on each other for mutual support, love, and care to mitigate for the government entities' shortcomings. Park Milbern made me feel like *there is always a way* to make change. She was unapologetic about what she needed and how she sought to be loved. I will forever be grateful for her life-sustaining teachings. When the pandemic hit, I knew that it was imperative to continue to apply what I learned from her and the disability justice community.

Honestly, it is difficult to write about the gifts that the pandemic has illuminated. It is difficult because of the immense human and resources loss marginalized communities experienced and continue to experience during the ongoing pandemic. Difficult also in the sense that the writing process surfaces personal topics that I continue to grapple with and that I will expound on later in my portion of the essay. I know that without writing this out now, I will be folded into the constant state of forgetting that universities are accustomed to practice in order to destabilize organizing efforts that support disabled and multiply marginalized communities. Through writing this, I urge myself to remember the moments, revelations, and lessons that came to me as I navigate this new collective experience. I realize now that this is the moment to hold firm my beliefs, write to affirm that we can create a more caring and collective world despite all the individualism that this country espouses. As Mia Mingus shares in her blog *Leaving Evidence*,

We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other. Evidence of who we were, who we thought we were, who we never should have been. Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live—past survival; past isolation.¹²

Mia Mingus calls upon us as disabled people to leave evidence when possible, because institutions will forget we ever existed. My part of this essay serves as a piece of evidence for both the losses and gifts during the pandemic. Through my student affairs leadership as a neuroqueer person of color my insights about accessibility, community care and disability justice are amplified to serve our communities in creative and meaningful ways. The way that the pandemic has shifted our work environment gives me the ability to advocate for LGBTQ+ communities, people of color, disabled people in new ways.

The need for accessibility is a necessary aspect of work now, whereas before it was an afterthought. By incorporating CART captioning, ASL, image descriptions, and more to our daily use of Zoom as a meeting platform, and through reassessing our policies to be in alignment with anti-racism efforts, accessibility practices have become more central.¹³ The higher education work landscape should not go back to how it functioned previously but rather move towards a hybrid and flexible work model that accounts for a true work life

balance. I insisted on keeping a hybrid work model to accommodate and retain our most marginalized staff members.

During the early months of the pandemic, I had the ability to pause and reflect on my own life during lockdown. The slower pace granted me time to share my thoughts about policing on campus and in this country. To me, disability justice is so closely tied to racial justice and prison abolitionist teachings. I share a short piece of a letter of concern that I wrote to Campus Public Safety Committee sparked by their request for feedback amidst the murder of George Floyd (Rest in Power) and ongoing tensions with campus policing:

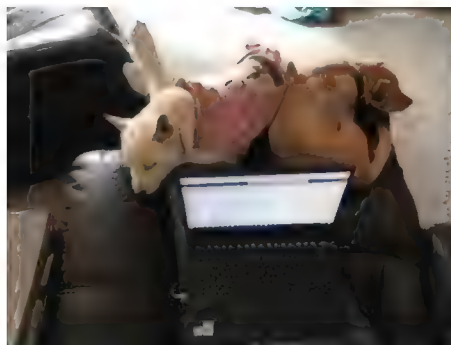
I am a staff member at UCLA who is seeking to see an active transformation of an institution that espouses values of equity, diversity, and inclusion. The true reality for me as a staff member at UCLA is consistently hearing from my students of color express fear, rage, and confusion as to why the police force continues to enact violence on Black, queer, trans and disabled community members across the country. Who is public safety actually serving? Who specifically is seeking to build community with the UCPD? My role requires that I serve a diverse student population and where we aim to receive Hispanic Serving Institution designation. As a student affairs professional I am key in retaining and recruiting students to UCLA, sadly not UCPD. We deeply need to reconsider where our primary funding is allocated on campus that is key to the sustenance, well-being and success of our most marginalized students on campus.¹⁴

I also asked myself questions about my gender. The question that came up for me that helped me process is, "What is my gender when no one is around?" My partner and I were locked down and I only had myself to face. I reflected on my past and realized that there are so many socializations that shape our selves/genders. I started to pick apart what worked for me and what did not. Most labels given to me by others. This question led me to realize that I identify as agender, and the woman category no longer served my bodymind. Not as a rejection of the past, but more of a homecoming to who I always felt deep inside my inner being. I then realized that many people around me were also navigating coming into their transgender and nonbinary identities during these times of isolation and quarantine. I experienced gender euphoria for the first time and it felt amazing to explore myself through clothing, makeup and more. It's exciting to even write about my gender exploration now because it makes me realize that even through times of most loss we still continue to grow in stillness.

I've been able to cook more at home meals, cut down on the draining commutes in Los Angeles and I now can appreciate the reconnection with my parents. My relationship with my parents was strained because they were struggling with the reality that I am queer. It required that I put strict boundaries on how I interacted with them for my own mental well-being. I deeply missed them during this time of not communicating with them. They

realized that I was not going to change for them, so they started to come around more. Then they both got Covid and I felt like the progress we made would disappear because I could not see them anymore. I then realized that it made our connection stronger. Thankfully, we are now moving towards healing our relationship. All aspects of what the pandemic has given to me are important, but the growing relationship with my parents is by far the biggest blessing and part of the larger goal to continue to heal during these times of hardship.

As I think about our original question—"What do we want to keep that the pandemic has given us?"—I realize that this collective writing process is a way to move past isolation and is healing medicine for me. It is a true gift to be here today to write this piece with my colleagues and friends who teach me every day that a caring and just world is possible. The three paragraphs here are a glimpse into my ongoing healing process that I understand as gifts now. My healing process which includes fighting for racial justice on campus, finding a greater sense of home in my gender, and rebuilding a relationship with my family. It is in our meetings where we discuss curly/wavy hair tips, laugh about silly Zoom filters, and share higher education woes that make me realize that we will be alright.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/image.png> >

Figure 1. Two pups and one lap



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/image-2.jpg>>

Figure 2. Zoom fun

Ria

When Stacey Park Milbern came to our university on February 12, 2019, we had issues with our camera.

We had wanted to record the session for the many university community members who were not able to attend and because we wanted to hold on to Park Milbern’s wisdom—educational gold that we knew would give to us for years to come. About halfway through, the camera stopped working, so we missed documenting a large part of the talk. I caught five minutes and twenty-eight seconds <

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/8UNx6MaHTbo6XH8s6>> on my phone. This is one of the only saved videos I have on my phone, so the little preview box pops open up every time I am looking through pictures. After Park Milbern died in June of 2020, I had been avoiding this video and its reminder that we had lost a powerful, young voice for justice all too soon.

As we come together to write this piece, I open the video up to witness Park Milbern.

In less than 6 minutes, Park Milbern explains the term “bodymind,” labels the preference of some bodyminds over others as eugenics, links the ongoing existence of this eugenics to capitalism, implicates the healthcare system for forcing people with disabilities to stay jobless so they can remain eligible for Medicare (the only insurance that allows for the long

term care and personal aids that many people with disabilities need), and how with an intersectional framework we can see that ableism works hand in hand with all the other *-isms*—with the help of culture—to keep power in place.

All of that in five minutes and twenty-eight seconds. Slowly, calmly, collectedly, delivering critical disability studies and disability justice to us without once naming them. Allowing us to get to the reality of “no body left behind” (the title of her workshop) through examples, experiences, histories rather than concepts. Weaving together complex theories through embodied knowledge. Park Milbern used this piece as an introduction to get us talking about how ableism is embedded in our campus culture. “Who is able to participate on campus? What does participation on campus require? Who is thought of as a leader, and who is not? All these questions . . .” She gave us ten minutes to discuss in small groups.

What was so important about Park Milbern’s workshop was not that it was the introduction to critical disability studies and disability justice that many of us needed, nor that it gave us the place to think about ableism in the academy, but that she brought both of these up in the same place so that we could no longer separate critical disability studies from critical university studies. We had to see that these were in fact two entangled pursuits – one focusing our critical lens with asking how power works and is maintained through bodies and one using another focus of the lens to ask how power works and maintains through knowledge production. These lenses work independently and together, ever-sharpening our ability to call out and challenge how power oppresses. Yet, even with these critical lenses overlapping in power and focus at our disposal, we so often lose sight of the oppression in our midst.

There are moments, however, that make inequity almost impossible to ignore. The first year of the coronavirus pandemic was one of them. As many of us adapted to living all aspects of our lives out of our homes, higher education was forced to quickly learn and develop methods to make teaching, learning, and working more accessible—adopting techniques long advocated for by a movement for disability justice.

As universities look to the future, many are touting fully in-person classes, a traditional living experience for students, and a general “return to normal” for students, faculty, and staff. Many fear that a return to normal will mean reverting back to a sense that higher education is only for the “normal,” the able-bodied, the “good”-bodied. Yet, these pandemic years have demonstrated, as universal access suggests, that everyone benefits from accessibility, from slowing down, and from a sense of mutual care.

In the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) realm of higher education, accessibility has suddenly seemed to become a requisite concept. A few years ago, having gender-inclusive restrooms at a national conference of higher education diversity professionals was

considered a challenge to adopt. Now many institutions are renaming their offices and officers to read ODEIA—A for accessibility, where previously only DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) existed. There is more attention to flexibility with scheduling, work-life balance, and general grace. Yet, this attention does not equal transformation.

Higher education institutions are made of people (to quote my mentor, Dr. Mary J. Wardell-Ghirarduzzi, a DEI visionary). People can change, will change, want to change. Institutions rarely change unless it benefits their bottom line. Yes, higher education will be more accessible to the extent that students do not look away during application season or withdraw from frustration. Yes, higher education will be accessible to the extent that staff can work from home and have flexible schedules. Yes, higher education will be accessible to the extent that faculty can continue to teach their traditional course load. But higher education will resist if it means employees collectively bargaining. It will resist if it means faculty having to unlearn pedagogies that maintain hierarchies of bodyminds. It will resist if it means that students learn that critiquing the university is part of their intellectual formation.

I know this because I have seen evidence of this every day as an institutional equity professional in higher education. The resistance to change is built into the fabric of institutional existence. Yet, I also see, daily, how simple the ways of being that foment change can be. Institutions are made of people, so change has to start with the relationships among them.

What the pandemic allowed us to do was to have space to think about the wellbeing of others. We had to quite literally think about how our breath impacted those around us. If we can do that, with heartfelt and thoughtful intention, then we can bring that intention into so many more aspects of our higher education existences.

Disability justice and DEI are both in the details. It starts with knowing people's names and what their stories are. If we start there, we can grow to know what it is that gets in people's way when they're trying to work well, live well, learn well. I know from my work that people will not tell you what gets in their way unless they trust you, deeply. Is there a plan to build trust in our institutions? Our strategic plans should be grounded in strategies to build trust.

Park Milbern did not talk directly about trust when she was with us in 2019. But she did talk about pace, and indirectly encouraged us to think about trust in this capacity, as others have done.¹⁵

What is pace if you do not trust that the people around you understand you, your needs, and your intentions? The pandemic has given us the place to assess our pace and how it relates to power. Who gets to set the pace, and why? How can we reset the pace so more

people can join the march? If we do this—stop to check the pace and reset with those around us—we will have held onto a gift, a rare gift, that the pandemic has given us.

Conclusion



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/image-1.png> >

Figure 3. #Stacey Taught Us

Emily took this photo while driving through the middle of San Francisco, streets largely still deserted because of the shelter-in-place orders during the late summer of 2020. It was a car that had traveled in a car parade of those mourning and remembering Park Milbern following her death a few months before. It was a moment of reflection, of relief, of remembering. Since that time, activists and community scholars have developed resources and syllabi of what Park Milbern taught and gave to us all, stitched together on social media through this hashtag, #StaceyTaughtUs. This hashtag generated an outpouring of memories, of shared love and grief, and concrete resources with which to apply the wisdom and intellectual contributions of Park Milbern.¹⁶ Seeing this reminder of what Park Milbern taught us on a car, moving down an almost empty street, seems an apt symbol of ourselves shared here, as our writing here is an opportunity to remember together—and to move back and forth across time and place as we remember and reflect about what the pandemic has given us.

Notes

1. Moya Bailey, "The Ethics of Pace," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no.2 (2021): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916032>. < <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916032>> ↩
2. Bailey, "Ethics of Pace," 296. ↩
3. Stacey Park Milbern, "Leaving No Body Behind: A Practice of Radical Imagination" (workshop, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, February 2019). ↩
4. Bailey, "Ethics of Pace," 285. ↩
5. Park Milbern, "Leaving No Body Behind." ↩
6. Bailey, "Ethics of Pace," 286. ↩
7. "What Was Happening" is a phrase I am using in this essay to refer to my tenure and promotion review. The program that I created and co-coordinated had been closed due to budget issues fifteen months before. I'd believed that my commitments, contributions, publications, service work all demonstrated my meeting (and exceeding) the contractual requirements for tenure and promotion. By that time in February 2019, I had been recommended and voted for tenure and promotion by the university peer-review committee. Prior to this recommendation, a one-vote majority of school committee members voted me "unsatisfactory" in teaching, and "superior" in research and service (which would mean a tenure and promotion denial because of the "unsatisfactory"). During my annual, administrative review meeting I was told that "I should expect the final decision to go the way of the school vote," even prior to either of these votes. And yet, I still believed it would turn out okay because it should have. Then, in March 2019, the dean and provost overturned the university peer-review committee's recommendation and denied me tenure. This meant that I would lose my job, benefits, health insurance, and institutional backing. It took everything in my being during this time to continue to do my job. It took disassociating, it took finding safe places (like those with Liz and Ria) for me to get onto campus during this time. This time took just about everything from me—materially, physically, cognitively, financially. I ended a home-study for an adoption because of the myriad forms of instability in my life. I filed an internal grievance. I was fired with thirty days' notice. My departure from the university in May 2019 meant that there were no faculty teaching critical and intersectional disability content. And that once again, disability and those associated with it, were disposable. ↩
8. R. DasGupta, Elizabeth Lopez, Nicola McClung, Stacey Park Milbern, and Emily A. Nusbaum, "Disability Justice in the Academy: Is Transformation Possible? A Collective Ethnography," (National Women's Studies Association, San Francisco, California, November 2019). All are co/lead authors. We worked collaboratively and democratically and are listed in alphabetical order by last name. ↩
9. What Was Happening (still) is that by the fall of 2019 I was working with employment attorneys to file a lawsuit for disability bias and associational discrimination against the institution. (I have never publicly claimed a disability status related to mental health support needs with employers. To do this has always felt, for me, too risky). At that time, and throughout a previous internal grievance process, I endured a tremendous amount of gaslighting and worse while having to revisit the reason for my tenure/promotion denial over and over and over (the reason being a subset of low teaching evaluations, largely from the academic year that my brother was dying from brain cancer). From the summer of 2019 into the winter of 2020, my mental health declined significantly. I am a person who lives in a highly anxious bodymind in the best of times. During this period, I had four to five major panic attacks a week, my social anxiety escalated, I was barely able to leave my apartment without disassociating, and I experienced periods of suicidal ideation. In spring semester 2020 I began teaching at another local institution and would often throw up and need to disassociate before being able to get out of my car on that campus. My lawsuit reached a settlement in May 2020. I refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement. ↩
10. Stacey Park Milbern, "Disabled queer and trans people band-aiding infrastructure for community is NOT romantic..." Facebook, October 26, 2019, accessed Fall 2020,

<https://www.facebook.com/smilbern/posts/861546044287> <
<https://www.facebook.com/smilbern/posts/861546044287>>. ↩

11. Milbern, "Disabled queer and trans people..." ↩
 12. Mia Mingus, "Leaving Evidence," accessed Fall 2020, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>. ↩
 13. At least, at the time that the early draft of this essay was written (2021) this was the case. Since then there has been a push to revert to "normal," and care practices are unfortunately less encouraged. ↩
 14. Elizabeth Lopez, letter to University of California Los Angeles Campus Public Safety Committee, 2021. ↩
 15. Moya Bailey encourages the "ethics of pace" to move at "the speed of trust," a concept that she credits, through adrienne maree brown, to community organizer Mervyn Marciano. Marciano himself built on this concept from Stephan Covey, a corporate motivational speaker. Bailey, "Ethics of Pace," 296. ↩
 16. Disability Visibility Project, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Alice Wong, "*#StaceyTaughtUsSyllabus: Work by Stacey Park Milbern*," accessed May 1, 2022 <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2020/05/23/staceytaughtus-syllabus-work-by-stacey-milbern-park/>. ↩
-

Author Information

Ria (Ariana) DasGupta

Ria (Ariana) DasGupta is the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Initiatives at The Juilliard School. She has over a decade of teaching and administrative experience in higher education. Prior to her current role, she served as the inaugural Chief Diversity Officer for Academic Affairs and Community Outreach at Georgian Court University. Ria was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco where she also served in the institutional equity office. As Interim Assistant Dean for First and Second Year Programs at Douglass Residential College (Rutgers University), she oversaw the college's first year mission course and a globally-focused living-learning community. Ria earned her doctorate in International and Multicultural Education from the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on the role of neoliberalism in shaping higher education DEI efforts. A kathak dancer, Ria brings more than thirty years of ballet, modern, capoeira, bharatanatyam, and Rabindrik training to her role as a faculty member for the Leela Academy and an ensemble dancer with the Leela Dance Collective.

[View all of Ria \(Ariana\) DasGupta's articles.](#)

Liz Lopez

Liz Lopez is based in South Central, Los Angeles and proudly identifies as first-generation, queer, and disabled. She has a combined ten years of experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in educational settings within the nonprofit, K-12, and higher education settings. She received her Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Affairs within Organizational Leadership at the University of San Francisco and Bachelor of Arts in Chicanx/Latinx Studies with an emphasis in Social Policy and minor in Education at the University of California, Davis. She aims to assist efforts that maintain and strengthen a culture and climate that is inclusive for all community members with marginalized backgrounds to thrive in education. Her research focuses on the application of disability critical race theory, disability justice, and restorative practices in higher education settings. Liz will begin a doctoral program at Claremont Graduate University in Fall 2023.

[View all of Liz Lopez's articles.](#)

Emily A. Nusbaum

Emily A. Nusbaum teaches courses in interdisciplinary disability studies, disability-centered curriculum, accessible pedagogy, and intro/advanced qualitative research at various universities. She is a lecturer in the Disability Studies minor at University of California, Berkeley. Emily's recent academic efforts have focused on partnerships with multiply-marginalized, disabled community scholars, resulting in the publication of a children's book, academic articles, public events, and grant funded projects. Her dissertation, "Vulnerable to Exclusion: A Disability Studies Perspective on Practices at an Inclusive School," won a 2010 American Education Research Association Outstanding Dissertation award. Most recently, her coedited book, *Centering Diverse Bodyminds in Critical Qualitative Inquiry* (Routledge, 2021) won an American Educational Studies Association 2022 book award. Her work has been published in peer reviewed journals and numerous edited volumes. Emily also spends part of her professional life as an advocate, consultant, and expert witness with families and legal teams in the pursuit of access to high quality general education contexts and curriculum for students labeled with disability who are most at risk for educational segregation and low expectations.

[View all of Emily A. Nusbaum's articles.](#)

Article details

Ria (Ariana) DasGupta, Liz Lopez, Emily A. Nusbaum, "The Place and Pace to Remember: Keeping What the Pandemic Has Given Us," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.14>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

For the Moment, I Am Not Scrolling

by Andrew Culp, Claudia Skinner, Adi Kuntsman, Esperanza Miyake and Tero Karppi | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Positions

ABSTRACT Andrew Culp and Cultural Studies Association's New Media and Digital Cultures Working Group Co-Chair Claudia Skinner take a look into Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake's new book *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: In Search of the Opt-Out Button*, published by University of Westminster Press (2022). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Tero Karppi.

KEYWORDS networks, internet, new media, digital media, online culture

Positions, Episode 1



Positions

For the Moment, I Am Not Scrolling

00:00 00:43:08

SUBSCRIBE SHARE

Download file < <https://csalateral.org/podcast-download/12099/positions-1-for-the-moment-i-am-not-scrolling-skinner-culp-kuntzman-miyake-karppi.mp3?ref=download>> | Play in new window < https://csalateral.org/podcast-download/12099/positions-1-for-the-moment-i-am-not-scrolling-skinner-culp-kuntzman-miyake-karppi.mp3?ref=new_window> | Duration: 00:43:08 | Recorded on May 27, 2023
Subscribe: Apple Podcasts < <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/positions/id1689898661>> | Spotify < <https://open.spotify.com/show/1KwO1nIVYENPWRYJPeldrE>>

The Misunderstanding(s) of Disconnection Studies

By Tero Karppi

"This is often how our work is misunderstood: as that we are calling people to live in the woods and kind of get off the grid," explains Adi Kuntsman towards the end of this episode of *Positions*. Kuntsman together with Esperanza Miyake is the author of a recent book

Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement and in this episode, they characterize the state of our current digital dependency. The fallacy Kuntsman's statement above outlines—that academic studies of digital refusal are simultaneously driving an abstention from technology—is important because it shows a tendency to give an oversimplistic solution to a complex problem. The acts of switching off, imposing a moratorium, or moving to a blackout zone all seem like acts of instrumental rationality, but the reasoning only applies if technology is external, like an add-on feature, to our culture and not its constitutive part. In other words, to imagine that one can switch off technology is to imagine that one can switch off culture. Through this lens, I will discuss some of the ways the podcast articulates the challenges of studies of our dependencies with Internet-based culture.

Tiziana Terranova quickly recaps the origin story of our cultural moment from the perspective of a network: the Internet begun as “a set of interoperable network protocols governed by a series of public and/or voluntary non-profit organizations” and after the network was commercialized, it gave power to big companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Meta.¹ Individuals and businesses alike found themselves being bonded with digital services in different walks of their lives. Being always on and actively engaging on social media, what Ludmilla Lupinacci calls “compulsory continuous connectedness,”² became a necessity for thriving, and in some cases surviving in the changing media environment. Some users turned into influencers and started making money through social media. Others followed, not the influencers' paths, but their daily Instagram and TikTok feeds.

Kuntsman and Miyake, however, go beyond social media and maintain that the state of “compulsory digitality” characterizes our living in modern society in general. The digital is our relationships maintained on social media, the digital is our mortgage handled through electronic banking, and the digital is Uber's algorithm that determines who gets the next ride and when. The term “digital” works as an abstraction of all the practical and sometimes impractical ways our lives are connected to the Internet and its online services. In their book, Kuntsman and Miyake explain that compulsory digitality peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic when individuals and organizations shifted “most everyday activities online, to facilitate social distancing and minimise exposure to coronavirus.”³ While many of us may be actively trying to forget life under COVID-19—according to World Health Organization it is not currently a global health emergency—the state of compulsory digitality is here to stay. The pandemic was by no means its cause but a specific moment in a much longer evolution where, as Miyake notes in the podcast, everything becomes digitized under the mandate of efficiency. The digital enter our economic, social, and political spheres to the extent that the idea of getting off the grid, disconnecting, and living in the woods is a choice for only a privileged few. For most of us, disengagement becomes a non-choice.

Yet, many of us try to manage our connectivity by disconnecting at least temporarily. Kuntsman and Miyake approach the state of compulsory digitality through the notion of digital disengagement. Simultaneously they warn us not to solely focus on individual practices of opting out. Behind the individualized practices of disconnection—Kuntsman and Miyake quite rightfully argue—is the big picture: how digital connectivity has been systematically built into the functions of modern society. The actual practices of deleting our social media profiles, locking our smartphones into a Faraday box, or cutting our credit cards, are ways to resist the digital in our lives, but they can also be analyzed as incisions that cut the fabric of our society held together by computational technologies. This big picture is sometimes hard to see when disconnection is being individualized. To be clear, the refocusing does not try to throw shade on the nascent field of disconnection studies—which is often interested in individual practices of disconnection—but rather tries to steer the questions from the individual to the systemic.

In the book, Kuntsman and Miyake want to move us “beyond the focus on disconnective practices into challenging the compulsory digitality on an economic, cultural, social and technical level.”⁴ Along these lines, Miyake challenges us by saying that one can disconnect from connectivity but how about sociality? In other words, if digital is the default for social like it was during the pandemic, how do you opt out of that? The answer the authors imply in the podcast episode is simply that you cannot. We are in this together to the extent that an outside exists as a viable option only for a selected few who have wealth and social capital. To dream of an outside is to misunderstand both the role and importance of connectivity in our society and our power to resist. Digital has become the default.

We should not misunderstand this as a totalizing condition. If there is no outside, then the resistance must emerge from within.⁵ We need a better understanding of the situation we are in. Digital literacy is needed to map what the different digital technologies do, what they solve, and to whom they work. Kuntsman lays out the questions we should be equipped to ask when we are faced with a new technology: Do we need the technology? Who is the technology going to harm? How do we defend ourselves?

The discussion in this podcast episode sees self-defense as the favorable framework through which resistance against compulsory digitality can be conceived. The narrative is established through building oppositions; Kuntsman places self-defense against the field of cybersecurity and points out that the former is a bottom-up approach while the latter comes from a militarized logic. Yet, focusing on self-defense feels counterintuitive to the proposition of resisting the individualization of digital disengagement and focusing on the systemic instead. Is not self-defense the tactic of the neoliberal individual to whom the responsibility is always assigned? And is not the capacity to self-defend unequally

distributed (echoing the many occasions when, even in this podcast, it is acknowledged that our capacities to operate in the digital world are not equal)? Self-defense—a term treacherously close to individualized practices of disconnection.

The defensive techniques, if one listens to the podcast carefully, are not limited to self-defence and cybersecurity. Digital disengagement acknowledges the potential of collective organization and labor. As Valérie Bélair-Gagnon and her colleagues have noted we should not misunderstand disconnection as a creator of negative space but “part of a continuum of situated practices that engender different relational ways of being with and in online spaces and communities.”⁶ Disconnection here is a shared relation. The second point is about replaceability. As the authors point out in the episode, we are still prone to misunderstanding the materiality of compulsory digitality: that the software applications we use, devices we own, and the online services we subscribe to have their material basis. The example mentioned in the podcast is the Fairphone, which is designed against being disposable. The components of the phone can be replaced if needed. The question is, what needs to be replaced so that the same old is not replicated?

The reversal of the roles between culture and technology, that technology is not the product of culture but culture’s producer, was one of Friedrich Kittler’s clever stratagems.⁷ If self-defence is a bottom-up approach and cyber security is a top-down approach, maybe we need a ground-up approach that replaces the technology behind this all: the Internet. It is easy to take the Internet, its physical architecture, its standards and protocols, and the way it controls the transmission of information as given. Yet, it is not. As Alexander Galloway already in 2004 pointed out: it is a specific diagram, technology, and management style.⁸ Following Britt Paris, Corinne Cath, and Sarah Myers West, “Internet infrastructure is built slowly, over time, protocol by protocol, in response to many different technical, social, political, environmental, and economic imperatives.”⁹ As such, the Internet has shaped our world in a very specific way unique to how the network operates and is designed. And even the Internet, its standards and protocols, can be changed, transformed, and replaced. “To best reconstruct the way out of a labyrinth . . . one doesn’t need to sketch the still visible connecting walls, rather their inverse: the invisible passages between path and door,” Kittler writes.¹⁰ If we cannot get rid of compulsory digitality, perhaps changing the model of the labyrinth beneath it would release some of its most problematic tensions.

Audio Transcript

Andrew Culp: Welcome to Positions Podcast, Cultural Studies Association’s sponsored podcast published through our open source journal *Lateral*. Positions aims to provide

critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. In our first episode, the New Media and Digital Culture CSA Working Group hosts “For the Moment, I’m not Scrolling”: Claudia Skinner and myself, Andrew Culp, where we take a look into Drs. Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake’s book *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement: In Search of the Opt-Out Button*, published by University of Westminster Press. Enjoy.

Claudia Skinner: So, for today’s episode, “For the Moment, I’m not Scrolling,” we are joined by Adi Kuntsman. Adi, good to have you here today.

Adi Kuntsman: Thanks so much. Hi, I’m Adi Kuntsman. I’m based in Manchester, U.K., and I’m a Reader in Digital Politics at the Department of History, Politics & Philosophy, and I research digital cultures and digital politics, including how people want to step away from the digital.

Claudia: Thank you. And we’re also joined by Esperanza Miyake. Esperanza, great to have you as well.

Esperanza Miyake: Hi Claudia, thank you very much for having us today. I’m Esperanza Miyake, Chancellor’s Fellow in Journalism, Media, and Communication over at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. And my research is mainly around questions of gender and race and the relationship between that and technology, both as representations in popular culture and as technopractices in everyday life.

Claudia: Today we plan to discuss how they developed the project, the current discourse on disengagement—

Andrew: And we will also talk about key cases and paradoxes from the book, such as the question of collective justice and where we are today.

Claudia: Well, I guess the first thing that we wanted to find out a little bit about and hear more on is the origin of your research project on digital disengagement. What got each of you involved on this topic? And then how did you come to work as collaborators? So, your individual stories, and then your story as a pair.

Esperanza: I think I would probably just first of all say that us collaborating as a pair in some ways comes first—well, obviously we each individual have our work, but we actually met 20 years ago, more than 20 years ago. There’s a sense of, I don’t know, Adi mentioned it, but we were Ph.D. students, so it started in a seminar room. We both had mohawks. Yeah, looking back on those kind of punky, cyberpunk days. But our very first project was actually on queerness and race, and it was a book, an edited collection called *Out of Place*:

Interrogating Silences in Queerness and Race. So, our collaboration actually goes quite, quite far back. But in terms of this particular digital disengagement, I think we probably arrived kind of separately and converged into a point about—would you say about eight years ago, when we started to notice this thing separately?

So, for me, the whole digital disengagement, the way I arrived to it is because I noticed as an academic and also having worked outside of academia, there was a lot about engagement and this obsession with student engagement, public engagement, community engagement. And this word *engagement* was seen as something beneficial for the audience. But I always noticed there's something transactional. It's never an innocent *let's engage with this community* or *engage with the students*; it's *we engage in order to find something out* that's inevitably going to, I think, always critically harm more than it will be a benefit to those. And the way that's often measured and the way I got disturbed by it was how digitality was such a part of that process of engagement. So, you know, social media engagement—all that kind of—whether it's educational, public engagement, everything is digitalized in measuring that engagement.

So that's for me, one way that I was really thinking about engagement and also, I think as a person of color, a queer person of color, I think I've always throughout my life had this idea of engagement and disengagement. I've always felt disengaged from everything. And so, for me, engagement has always been not a straightforward I'm either engaged or not; it's a negotiated position. So those things for me have always come together and I think, well, yeah, that's how I arrived to it. And obviously Adi and I, because we've been collaborating, we've often talked about things like this. So, I don't know, Adi, I'll pass over to you and your journey to disengagement.

Adi: Thanks. Yeah, sure. But I mean, first of all, because we have worked together for so long, we kind of get each other on so many levels, whatever topic you go into it. We started as Ph.D. students 20 years ago, so we've kind of had a long journey through various theoretical and political terrain. But I think also when I remember kind of where this particular project started. I've been doing—both of us really—but I've been doing stuff on digital cultures and the way people use digital technologies. It was migrant community, the LGBT community, people doing it for political violence. So, you know, I've done stuff on LGBT migrants online, on militant patriotism and right wing nationalism in times of war online. So, there was so much of it, and without ever asking questions of what's outside of the digital, or does it have to be digital, and as digital culture, digital communication progressed—and I remember it was shortly after I started my new job, my job at my current university—there was *digital innovation*, *digital transformation*. So, the language of the digital was absolutely everywhere, both in terms of technical and design, and in terms of how people communicate, what institutions adopt. And so, I moved from looking at digital

as being something new and looking at how this can open up certain doors and whether good doors or bad doors: it could create a sense of community or tear people apart. But it was something new being introduced and one day finding myself in a society, if you like, where it is everywhere, it is compulsory.

And as a side anecdote, which I love retelling. I've just been reading a piece of science fiction, which isn't particularly interesting and you know, could be taken apart on so many levels, but that was a piece—and that was about seven or eight years ago—a lot of the things that I described there have now totally happened and became reality. But it was about this near-future world with a range of technological innovations which again today are pretty much happening where basically digitality became compulsory really fast in a kind of very familiar marriage of the corporate world and the political world and everything that's being decided there and then very quickly went from "Wow this cool, new thing," which some people may love, like "we love social media," and some people may not, like, "we don't like social media," but it very quickly became something compulsory without which first you couldn't find a job, then you couldn't get any money, and then you couldn't do anything. And then you hunkered down and died.

And there is so much to be said about this. I mean, one of the things that I was talking to my students about, one of the strange things about that piece of science fiction, is that it was written by a white man, and the things that were described there were long affecting many marginalized communities. But it's only when it hits the center that it becomes an issue. But be that as it may, I do remember reading it, and I do remember actually having a nightmare about our near-coming future, which then became for me, this quest to ask: Okay, what if we want to question the digital? What if we want to opt out of the digital? How would that look like? Is that even possible? And it was scarily perfect because since we started working on it together, and then the pandemic came much later, things have escalated so much more compared to where we were when we started.

Claudia: I wanted to ask more about that terminology and what you think is maybe going on as to how we're understanding engagement and operationalizing engagement. That might be a good segue into talking more about terminology from there in your book. But yeah. I'd love to hear more about what you think is going on as to how we're approaching this idea of engagement.

Esperanza: Thank you for that question, Claudia. In terms of engagement and disengagement, it's an interesting point because there is a sort of growing area of what people now call *disconnection studies* and the idea of digital disconnection. And I think it's kind of almost, well, a field, really, of people thinking on disconnecting. But we went specifically with *disengagement* rather than disconnection. And perhaps it's because of two things. One part of it is "connect" and "disconnect" has a very kind of—well, so does

"digital disengagement" and "engagement"—it's very dualistic. But what we want to get through with engagement is it goes beyond that connectivity of digitality, but thinks to include social engagement, engagement with, you know, the economy, digital economy; so, there's various aspects of engagement: social, economic, cultural engagement. There's kind of different types of engagement as part of digital engagement. So, what does it mean to disengage? You can disengage from the connectivity of digitality, but can you disengage from the sociality of it?

I think that's what we were trying to—not maybe pull out, but to be more flexible in the term of engagement or connection or disconnection. I know it's kind of semantic in some ways, but I think it's a very intentional way we chose engagement rather than connection to encapsulate and incorporate other forms of engagement which are also used in culture. As I said earlier, you know, public engagement activities, social media engagement: it's a kind of buzzword that's used. But behind many a buzzword, there's kind of a more sinister process going on and I think that's for us something we want to critique through the lens of digitality and the way we—I was going to say *engage*—interact, use technologies.

Andrew: Maybe we can use this chance to map out a few of the other key terms that are really establishing the anchor points for debates around digital disconnection or disengagement, as well as terms that help motivate your book. And I'm thinking terms that are both coming from the field that are essential for scholars, but maybe some of the popular audience or popular culture terms. I know that people are talking about a *techlash*, for instance, but for you all, "data justice" seems like a very important term and something that I took from the book that I loved reading about.

Adi: One of the things that we noticed over the years as we're working on the topic is how the discussion about: *Is there too much digitality? Is the digital becoming inescapable? Is it becoming compulsory? Can we do it in any other way?* that this discussion is being sidelined or co-opted into: "Oh, I just left my phone for a bit" or "I just deleted my Facebook account." So, there was something individualized and coming from both a privilege and also something casual and something that doesn't have any systemic questions at all.

And I remember that as we presented our work in progress over the years, people got really excited and said: "Yes! I also decided to delete my Facebook account," or "I also stopped using Twitter." And we kept saying: No, it's not actually about that; one of the things it is about, we believe, is about opt-out as not just as a technical option—even though the title of our book is: *Is There an Opt-Out Button*, with a kind of tongue in cheek and a metaphor—but it's not just about—I mean, it *is* about design, is there a techno-social layout for this possibility—but it's also thinking systemically: when, how, who has the possibility to opt-out? So, we always try to hold the two together: the design software interface part, which is very important because if this possibility isn't there, then you can't, but also always

reminding our readers and ourselves that even when it is there, it's not available to everyone. One of the things that was really striking to us as we were working on this project is how temporary disconnection, whether short term or longer term, is a luxury and becoming more and more of a commodity, as opposed to a right.

Interestingly, we were thinking about this before GDPR came into force. Because you're outside of Europe, maybe to kind of remind the audience: General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a European law, which came into force in 2018. We had been working for a few years already, and we were really excited because in some sense it was something that if somebody asked before: What kind of law would you like there to be? we would describe something like that. And GDPR talks about the protection of individual data rights and how basically placing the responsibility onto corporations and institutions to inform anyone about which data is going to be collected, how it will be used, to do an opt-in, rather than an opt out, so people need to explicitly agree for their data to be collected and held, not hold it over the necessary, deleting it after that. And you know, we are now coming to five years since it was introduced, and it is very strong, and it did make a difference.

So, on one hand, this is exactly what we were thinking about because we started with digital disengagement as a citizen right. But we also went further thinking about, yes, it is an individual right, but actually there are also questions of collective justice where individual rights are not enough.

Esperanza: I suppose one thing I would add about the individual thing: another thing that we, in our own journeys, started thinking about more and more was the kind of individualization, that in itself, that discourse of making in an individual right, places the onus on the individual. *You* have to be the one to click the button—that's actually where we started, right? But we've moved in our own thinking that it shouldn't be that kind of self-responsibilization of ethics and, you know, if data wants control, then [opt-out] should be the default. That should be the starting point for everyone. It's a collective thing. So that's the only thing I would add about the individual, individualization, and self-responsibilization.

Adi: There are also questions of collective justice, where individual rights are not enough, and they're not enough for two reasons. One of them is that a lot of the monetization of data and profit that is made off datafication isn't interested in individual bits of data. So, the data economy is about collective patterns, the so-called big data. So just me isn't of any interest to any corporation, or any of us, in this virtual world. It is the combination of all users of Facebook, all users of some other platform that actually provides value, experience. And because these incredible, amazing, algorithmically-driven systems know you best, wouldn't that be amazing? And that's the whole discourse of personalization.

So, one of the ways, for example, in which data grabbing of various websites and apps is presented is that we're going to tailor the experience uniquely to you, and that's why we want your data. So, there are kind of two things here. One is whether somebody would want things to be tailored to them. And that's one question. But the other one is: the assumption that the representation is going to be true, that how digital systems see you is going to be true. And one of the things that we've been informed by the work of others who are unpacking it, including Ruha Benjamin, is that the way digital data systems see us, all of us, is deeply racialized, for example. And so, in a data economy that traffics in collective value, there is a limit to talk about individual rights. And while we're more we're both calling in our book to think about collective justice and collective data justice in particular, which is a concept that we borrowed from Linnet Taylor, where he talks about data justice as the right not to be part of a database, the right not to be included, the right not to be counted.

So that's one bit. But the other one, which is related, is how digital rights are not given in the same way to everyone. So, for example, even GDPR has its limitations such as criminality or terrorism. So, the moment it comes to criminal offenses/police needs, or so-called anti-terrorist laws, all data rights are going out of the window. And well we know that, for example, racialized communities, or migrant and refugee communities, are over-policed much more strongly than white communities. This amazing system that is in place and seems to be wonderful actually is only offering protection to some. And again, this calls into question the whole individual idea of data rights, which looks beautiful on paper, because every time you agree to terms and conditions, or you agree for your data to be processed, it does sound like something is changing or something moving on, but we argue that it is not enough, and we must shift from individual focus to collective justice.

Esperanza: Sorry, just going back on the representation issue—I just was thinking whilst everyone's talking about it, the pandemic actually flipped this a little bit in terms of whether we want to be seen through the data, in terms of the way, you know, contact tracing and collecting data was seen as a social responsibility. You share your data in order to contain the virus. If you've got COVID, you share [that data]. And there was a sense of collective move, but also individual responsibility to share your own data. And I think that was one of, for me at least, certainly, was fascinating during the pandemic, was some of the things that we're talking about, like: *I don't want to be... no surveillance*. And that in itself is sometimes a privilege as well. You know, in the face of death and something as drastic as the pandemic, that sort of thing kind of went out the window a little bit, and we needed to, for clinical research, make our data visible. So, I think I just wanted to add that because it was a bit of a kind of flip and subversion in terms of how this idea of: Do we want to be counted? Do we want to be included in that big data analysis?

Adi: I think this also gets us back to the question of data justice. When we're talking about collective rights, we're talking also about that. So, when we talk about should we, can we opt-out of those digital systems, we're also looking at opting out of the injustice that they inflict, wrapped into the kind of promise of being seamless and efficient and great and amazing.

Andrew: Yeah, this reminds me of some deep changes that are happening here in California. You know, there's this old chestnut that I can tell you what your income or your salary or your wealth is just by knowing your zip code. And the way this is sort of going into digital systems. California is considering going away from a cash bail system to a purely quantitative system for all kinds of criminal justice and system-affected people, from parole, to determining how much people will pay for bail, and then your social network, just the people who might be your contacts in your phone, suddenly influence your life opportunities. Or the Los Angeles Police Department considers you part of a gang just because of who you went to high school with. So, this makes me think of compulsory digitality, which is a very important term in your book about how it's not just that there are some people who choose to make this data available, that's then scrubbed and used by these social institutions. But it's something that everyone feels sort of compelled to participate in. So, Esperanza, do you think you could outline the terms of compulsory digitality for us, so our audience feels like they can understand it with more detail?

Esperanza: Well, I don't know if there's a kind of hard and fast definition for it, but I would say that compulsory digitality is, as the term suggests, where increasingly we're moving in a world where everything is being digitalized in the name of efficiency. And if you think about environmentalism, it's paperless, it's digital, it's more personalized. You know, you can book your doctor's appointments without having to go through a myriad of phone calls and things, and it's all kind of sold as—some of this Adi touched earlier on. And so, this idea that digital by default, we're digitizing all sorts of processes across the board from whether it's education, border control, everything is digitalized. So increasingly we're forced to be in a world where we can't operate without digitality or some kind of—going back to the idea of engagement and disengagement—engagement with the digital. And as I mentioned earlier, it's because of platformization and the way things are synched, you can't engage one bit and disconnect from everything else; everything is connected, platformized, "social media-tized." Even if you, I don't know, got rid of your social media account, can you then log into other things, for example? Because increasingly a lot of accounts now force you to log into your social media account, and things like that.

So, if in terms of opt-out, if you don't have access or for whatever reason you don't want to share data, what are the options for you? How do you get a job? That's one of the things that we explore in our book is the idea of opt-out. What if you don't participate in this force

digitally? How else can you live? And I think a lot of it comes from this idea as well we borrow from this idea of internet centrism, [Evgeny] Morozov's idea that everything is Internet centric, everything goes through the internet. And the other one is Morozov's idea of technological solutionism. So, we kind of borrowed that in thinking about digital solutionism: if there is a problem, a supposed problem, with throw digitality at it, including things like if there's too much digital stuff, let's throw an app to help you manage the digital. Everything is digitalized, and I think that's what we mean by compulsory digitality.

Andrew: And then in terms of the paradoxes to digital detox: there's a lot of hidden labor and privilege in it, as well as the way in which it's put in ecological metaphors. And so, there is a sort of greenwashing that goes in and it only allows sort of partial opt-outs. And there's some people who can really benefit from it, and it's often put in this healthiness framework.

Adi: Thank you. I think you summarize it really well that basically the first part of the book talks about various examples of where the space of opt-out is shrinking. And again, we started writing about that before the pandemic, and it came to the fore way more during the pandemic. So, education, citizenship, and health, which, you know, I want us to elaborate on, but these are areas where we may like it or we may not like it, but there is very little and increasingly less and less a way of opting out of it. So, you know, citizenship and welfare services, in particular, or visa applications, or policing, where you would have loved to but you absolutely can't, and they're very much tied to privilege where if you are not a worker recipient, if you are not a refugee, then you have more room to opt-out.

So, we have seen a general, broader process of a shrinking of spaces of opt-out. And then we moved on to looking at when this does happen. Because as we were working on our topic and then writing the book, the conversation about too much digital and digital detox and disconnection was also growing bigger and bigger. This is, I think, at the heart of the paradox: the shrinking of opt-out and the growing grumbling about the digital have developed hand in hand. So, we then turned to: Okay, when it does happen, how does it look? And maybe I'll use the example of environment as one that's particularly interesting because one of the reasons we thought it would be important to digitally disengage or important to reduce the amount of the digital is the increasing environmental harm inflicted by the digital. And this is something that's very rarely discussed because we still think of the digital as something immaterial. Now, when we save something on the cloud, we still kind of assume it's on the cloud, but it's not on the cloud, it's in a data server. And once you step out of communication studies, the wealth of evidence is tremendous. And actually, there is a growing body of work within communication studies. But nevertheless, it has not yet made it into the mainstream of how we think about digital communication. We just think about what we say, and how we say it—fake news, hate speech—so it is kind of about what we do and the meanings and representations, but not about the materiality of it.

So, one of the hopes of having less digital or opting out or reducing would be environmental harms, and motivated by that particular hope, we looked at what happens when stepping out of the digital is presented in environmental terms. Is it this revolutionary, transgressive process of saying: There is horrific amount of e-waste, there is extractive economies of mining, there is growing carbon footprint; we should use less for those reasons? And as we turned to it, actually we discovered something else. One of the things that we looked at is how digital detoxes, for example, if you look at how they're represented, this is, Claudia, your question of representation, both visually and in terms of words and symbols, they're very much represented as something that's about nature, and also *green*.

So, I, for example, did a very quick Google search of images. What if you look for "digital detox"? You literally get a green screen: lots of images, some of them are green icons, some of them are pictures of nature, so there was a kind of symbolic conflation of digital detox/stepping out of the digital with nature, which then symbolically leads to this dichotomy of horrible technology and beautiful nature. But unpacking that, what we found is that this kind of stepping away from the digital was very much presented as a privilege; it wasn't narrated as a privilege. It was a privileged thing to do, such as go to a digital detox somewhere else, costing hundreds and hundreds of pounds, and then tapping into the extractive economy of global tourism, very much with colonial images of going somewhere in the wilderness where you can leave your phone behind. And interestingly, very little, if anything at all, precisely about the questions of global environmental justice. So, we talked about collective data justice. We also need to talk about collective environmental justice. So, there was very little of that.

And because of that, we also turned to looking for initiatives which do explicitly try to minimize environmental harm. And one of them, which actually is really beautiful, is the example of Fairphone, and that's trying to resist and confront the disposability of our digital culture. So again, we're not just talking about representations and meanings of words, but the actual devices that allow us to do this communication. They are part of a built-in obsolescence, part of a digital economy that has so much waste.

I ask my students, how often do they change their phone, and they usually say between a few months and two years, at the most. The digital economy itself, for example—even if you wanted to hold onto your phone for longer, you can't for a number of reasons. The simplest one of them and the one that probably would speak to your listeners is that in most phones today you can't replace the battery. So, one of the first things that goes is the battery, and wouldn't it be so easy—earlier phones, especially non-iPhone Android phones, were allowing that, including fancy phones—if you could open the lid, buy a new battery, and give it several more years. It is now impossible. Apple had it for longer; other phones follow

suit. So that makes them basically a very expensive piece of e-trash that becomes trash very quickly.

So, the initiative that we were writing about is Fairphone, which is a European—I think Dutch—small kind of social justice start up, which follows the principles of fair trade, both the phone itself as a material object that can live longer because every component can be replaced. So, there are different things that can go—a screen can be cracked, memory can be insufficient, a battery can lose its charge—you can replace each of them, but only the one that is needed as opposed to the whole thing, and the core of the phone will stay for as long as it can. So that's a really, really important mission, but also—again, following the principles of fair trade—they as a company are also paying attention to how workers on the digital assembly line are treated, and that the process itself is fair, because normally it absolutely isn't.

So, we're writing about that with a lot of admiration and respect, but also wondering what are the limits of this kind of challenge? Because a phone like that is quite expensive, nowhere near as expensive as an iPhone, but unless we're talking to people, all of whom have iPhones, a lot of people can't afford something close to a thousand or over. And the debate between \$500 or maybe \$100 for a secondhand phone is a really real one. So, it depends. When I talk to my students, I get quotes where everyone has an iPhone and then they say, well, 500 is nothing. But I invite all of us to step out of that world. 500 dollars will feed you for a very long time. So, the question of, when it's still expensive, who is it open to? But also, in the spirit of our broadest thinking about reducing, limiting, opting out at all, having a phone keeps us in the loop of digitality and digital connection.

So, it kind of leads to the question of is the solution supporting and enabling and continuing the culture of compulsory connectivity, as José van Dijk puts it, rather than having a bigger potential. So, this is probably one of the biggest insights. We also had several other examples within the book of the various ways of thinking about digitality being more sustainable. And I would say this leads to a really big debate of: Do we give up or do we amend? And I think this kind of dilemma is not unique to the question of the digital. Do we make things a little bit better and a little bit more bearable—kind of evolution versus revolution—or do we just find ways to dismantle it completely? And I think some of the answers are kind of a matter of judgment and value. Some of them are about: Is it what you aspire to versus what's real? So, I'm trying always to hold on to both. So, in some of our arguments we aspire to actually reducing, refusing, recycling the digital. But also, it's really important to think about those initiatives which allow in the meantime to make digital as we have it more environmentally just.

Claudia: I wanted to ask in terms of these strategies of collective justice, how important you think the labor movement is to these efforts to change the system. You all have

brought up gig labor that I thought was so important in your work and the solidarities that can form to create change. I guess I wanted to maybe ask Esperanza to start us off in, in terms of talking about this role of the labor movement in our collective justice prospects for the future.

Esperanza: When you say labor movement, you mean the platform gig labor, that side of things? I think it's a difficult one to answer because in some ways it goes back to the very question of privilege and who has the resources to opt-out. And in terms of gig workers and platform workers, you know, we talk about: "Oh, just do disengagement and digital detox." I mean, really, you know? Is an Uber driver going to go on a digital detox holiday because they've got too much digitality in their lives? So, in terms of collective justice, while there are movements and there's ways, and there are studies of, I think it's Uber drivers, who collectively kind of changed the algorithms and coordinated. So, there are pockets of activities like that.

But I think one thing we need to move away from is not to see it as "Let's move away from the digital," because that's actually one of the ways our work has been misinterpreted often. The number of times that we've actually presented at conferences and things, lots of people interpret [our work] as we're saying, "Let's get rid of the digital" and that collective justice and individual rights all comes from reducing the digital. In some ways that is the case, but that's not what we're saying. We're saying using the digital tools rather than letting them be weaponized against us, to collectively use them in ways that are more ethical and come from within.

Adi: I think it gives us so much to think about. And I would maybe take it a bit beyond the question of the labor movement also because the kind of Labor Party labor movements are very in different countries. I mean, I can comment on, you know, the Labor Party and the labor movement in the UK or, I don't know, in the Soviet Union, but not, necessarily, maybe in the U.S., but it is important to think about questions of digital labor, but also kind of remembering that people who are involved in the gig economy very often have extremely limited resources to get organized. And it's an extremely brutal, individualized work. But I think if we're thinking of what else can be done, what kind of other forms of collective organizing are there? I would say, first and foremost, it's important that we think about these forms of collective organizing together with people who are on the receiving end and affected. So, one thing it's important for it not to be an academic exercise, and there are a number of really beautiful for to do that. And I think one of them is actually US-based; it is called Our Data Bodies, which is something that inspired us greatly, and that leads me to the idea of digital self-defense that they mention—this is something that they use and that we write about in our book. So, the idea that we're thinking about how can groups and

communities that are most affected by the violence of the digital or the inability to opt out, or the inability to escape digital harms, what do they do in response?

And in some cases, it might be stepping out of the digital. In many cases, this is not possible as we show throughout the book and therefore other forms of resistance such as self-defense are needed. And these could include being aware of how algorithmically-driven automated decision making systems are working to be able to survive them are resist them where possible. Actually, acquiring digital literacy, not because everyone should be digitally engaged and included, but because these tools are absolutely necessary.

And we got to thinking about self-defense as opposed to cybersecurity and how different they are, even though both frameworks think about living safely in the digital world. If you kind of think about it this way. But cybersecurity across the world is top down. And secondly, it's a militarized paradigm with everything that comes with it, as opposed to self-defense, which is bottom up and community driven. And therefore, these opportunities will look different in different communities and will be crafted differently, will be negotiated differently. We've got a beautiful group in Manchester called Manchester Open Data, where they actually work with how data can serve communities.

It's different to what we are arguing. So rather than saying "No data. No more digital. Let's all go away"; it's saying data is everywhere. It's used by the government; it's used by every business. How can we empower communities so that decisions that are made, are made with them in mind, but also it is really important to us, is that this discussion is never driven by *digital is amazing* and *digital is inevitable* and *digital must be there*. They are driven by *if it's there, how do we live with it?* But also, constantly asking, Do we need this digital option? Maybe something else would be better. And I think it's really important for us to mention that this is often how our work is misunderstood as if we're calling for people to live in the woods and get off the grid, which A) we're not, and B) in itself is a huge luxury. So, we're not calling to live off the grid in the woods; we are calling to ask whenever we approach any newly introduced, newly developed, newly launched form of digitality is to ask: Do we need it? Who is it going to harm? How are they going to defend themselves? What kind of tools do we need to develop? And if we don't need it, we shouldn't adopt it.

So, I'll stop there.

Andrew: I couldn't ask for a better call to action, community driven, affected-community focused approach to the digital. So wonderful.

Claudia: Well, thank you so much Adi and Esperanza for joining us today. This has been just such a fantastic conversation, so illuminating for all of us here and I'm sure for our listeners today.

Esperanza: Let me just say thank you for having us today. We really enjoyed the discussion.

Adi: Indeed. Thanks very much. And your questions were absolutely wonderful and thought-provoking.

Andrew: And we'd also like to thank the Positions production team, including Mark, Elaine, Jeff, Nick, all the people out there.

Claudia: And you can join us for the next episode of Positions, hosted by the Performance Studies Working Group: "Let's Relax," which will discuss the concept and practice of relaxed performance, one of the accessibility services for neurodivergent audience members in theater.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter.

Hosted by Andrew Culp, Claudia Skinner, and the CSA New Media & Digital Cultures Working Group.

Production by Elaine Venter, Nick Corrigan, and Lucy March.

Editorial by Mark Nunes, Jeff Heydon, Evan Moritz, Hui Peng, and Richard Simpson.

Music by Matt Nunes < <https://open.spotify.com/artist/5r7EEqpB7cPsBRRV9ek1la?si=hdJkjavJQtid6R1VrkJDLg> > .

[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

1. Tiziana Terranova, *After the Internet* (South Pasadena, Calif.: Semiotext(e), 2022), 7-8. ↩
2. Ludmila Lupinacci, "'Absentmindedly Scrolling through Nothing': Liveness and Compulsory Continuous Connectedness in Social Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 2 (2021): 275. ↩
3. Adi Kuntsman & Esperanza Miyake, *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement* (Westminster: University of Westminster Press, 2022), 1. ↩
4. Kuntsman & Miyake, *Paradoxes of Digital Disengagement*, 14. ↩
5. Cf. Taina Bucher, "Nothing to Disconnect From? Being Singular Plural in an Age of Machine Learning," *Media, Culture & Society* 42(4) (2020), 610-17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720914028> > ; Tero Karppi, "Undoing the Outside: On Defaults and Off-Facebook Activity," in Tero Karppi, Urs Stäheli, Clara Wieghorst, and Lea P. Zierott, eds. *Undoing Networks* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 51-78. ↩

6. Valérie Bélair-Gagnon, Diana Bossio, Avery E. Holton, and Logan Molyneux, "Disconnection: How Measured Separations from Journalistic Norms and Labor Can Help Sustain Journalism," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305122107721> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077217>> . ↩
 7. Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 369–72. ↩
 8. Alexander Galloway, *Protocol. How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 3. ↩
 9. Britt S. Paris, Corinne Cath, and Sarah Myers West, "Radical Infrastructure: Building Beyond the Failures of Past Imaginaries for Networked Communication," *new media & society* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144482311525> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231152546>> . ↩
 10. Friedrich A. Kittler, "The City is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996): 717–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057387> < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057387>> , p. 718. ↩
-

Author Information

Andrew Culp

Andrew Culp teaches media history and theory in the MA Program in Aesthetics and Politics and the School of Critical Studies at CalArts. His published work on media, film, politics, and philosophy has appeared in *Radical Philosophy*, *parallax*, *angelaki*, and *boundary 2* online. He serves on the Governing Board of the Cultural Studies Association. In his first book, *Dark Deleuze* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), he proposes a revolutionary new image of Gilles Deleuze's thought suited to our 24/7 always-on media environment, and it has been translated into numerous languages including Spanish, Japanese, and German.

[View all of Andrew Culp's articles.](#)

Claudia Skinner

Claudia Skinner is a PhD candidate in American Studies and Culture at Washington State University (WSU). She is co-chair of the New Media and Cultures Working Group of the Cultural Studies Association and serves as graduate assistant for WSU's Undocumented Initiatives.

[View all of Claudia Skinner's articles.](#)

Adi Kuntsman

Adi Kuntsman is Reader in Digital Politics at Manchester Metropolitan University. Previous publications include *Selfie Citizenship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media* with Rebecca L. Stein (Stanford University Press, 2015), and *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change* co-edited with Athina Karatzogianni (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[View all of Adi Kuntsman's articles.](#)

Esperanza Miyake

Esperanza Miyake is Chancellor's Fellow in Journalism, Media & Communication at the University of Strathclyde. Alongside news media outputs (*New York Times*, *Newsweek Japan*) and consultancy on data ethics and privacy, she is

author of *The Gendered Motorcycle: Representations in Society, Media, and Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and co-editor of *Digital Disengagement COVID-19: Digital Justice and the Politics of Refusal* with Adi Kuntsman and Sam Martin, forthcoming from Bristol University Press.

[View all of Esperanza Miyake's articles.](#)

Tero Karppi

Tero Karppi is Associate Professor of Critical Computation and Digital Media at the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology at the University of Toronto. For a decade, Karppi has been working on the nascent field of disconnection studies focusing on how social media platforms engage their users and keep them captivated despite emerging desires to quit. He examines the role of social media in our daily lives and investigates how the power of these platforms is designed, established, and enacted. Karppi is the author of *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), one of the authors of *Undoing Networks* (University of Minnesota Press / Meson 2021), and one of the editors of *Reckoning with Social Media* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

[View all of Tero Karppi's articles.](#)

Article details

Andrew Culp, Claudia Skinner, Adi Kuntsman, Esperanza Miyake, Tero Karppi, "For the Moment, I Am Not Scrolling," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.15>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *The Breaks: An Essay* by Julietta Singh (Coffee House Press)

by Pavithra Suresh | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Julietta Singh uses an epistolary tradition to meditate on pressing challenges in the contemporary moment. She fixates on a resounding theme: how must we break from existing systems to truly center the most vulnerable in our institutions and epistemologies? In a long-form letter to her six-year-old daughter, Singh reflects on queer life and architecture, family trauma, radicalization, and collective mobilization.

KEYWORDS feminism, queer, ethnography, parenting, memoir

The Breaks: An Essay. By Julietta Singh. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2021, 168 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5668-9616-0. US List: \$16.95.

In the stark dog days following the United States Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, many of my feminist colleagues and I have found ourselves scrambling to answer the questions: How do we resist? How do we navigate a world hostile to our bodies? How might we reconfigure ourselves to support the most vulnerable? Julietta Singh's monograph-length essay *The Breaks* offers a series of meditations on these questions and more, including a way forward. Singh's essay, penned to her young daughter, ruminates on the messy realities of "learning to mother at the end of the world" (3). Her epistolary form contributes meaningfully to this thesis; similar to works like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Singh buttresses her work with reflections on key moments in her daughter's upbringing in the late 2010s and early 2020s. For example, early in the essay, Singh meditates on the questions her daughter asks about Thanksgiving mythologies and the darker, obscured reality of the holiday. Critiquing a "manicured version of history that keeps European whiteness at its center" (2), Singh expresses an urgency to "scramble to harvest alternative histories omitted by the textbooks, the histories of those who have faced annihilation and lived toward survival" (3). She grapples with a desire to make her daughter feel safe but also "needing [her] to know that the earth and its inhabitants are facing a catastrophic crisis" (3).

Through autoethnographic prose, Singh takes us through the existential questions that arise, particularly for those of us who emerge “from the subjugated ends of history, who [stand] outside of whiteness but [are] also saturated by its power” (9). Citing the urgency of James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” and Coates’ work, Singh reports that she “writes not with the immediate fear that you will be gunned down by police in the streets, or that you will be metabolized by the prison industrial complex, but with an adjacent set of fears about being a Brown girl in a country that thinks and feels race through a sharp binary” (11), delving into an uncomfortable recognition of the ways that whiteness compels us into silence and complicity.

Unlike a conventional monograph, *The Breaks* avoids rigid structure; the essay flows as a stream of consciousness, creating opportunity for meaningful tangents and parallels to emerge between seemingly disparate topics. The unconfined form of Singh’s writing, along with her cascading prose, translates anecdotes to the larger purpose of Singh’s work. Engaging theory and anecdote with equal validity, *The Breaks* moves through topics including Singh’s journey to motherhood, queer life and architecture, violent family histories, disablement, racial trauma, police brutality, and collective mobilization. Nonetheless, the essay is anything but unfocused, as the meandering narrative centers intentionally on opportunities for her daughter to learn from yet break from many of the theories and traumas of Singh’s life and the dominant systems that produced those experiences. For example, when discussing the harm of epistemologies rooted in colonialism, Singh encourages her daughter to continue to play with language and theory: “I try to teach you against my own teaching, to reanimate a world of flourishing animacies I have almost lost” (14). Singh demonstrates this strategy when telling the story of the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, DC, during which her then-four-year-old daughter instructs what should go on their sign: “No Walls; No Meanies; More Girls!” She basks in awe of her child: “It’s as though you are learning the present and the future all at once, undeterred by the magnitude of each” (107).

Fundamentally, Singh’s essay engenders multiple opportunities for resisting systems of domination. She questions the economic reductionism of existing leftist configurations for revolution, musing “shouldn’t the immediate threat of human extinction trump the Marxist formulation of class revolution?” (21). Singh recognizes that the ways she was raised, and indeed even the ways she is raising her daughter, may not be compatible with the emergent strategies for global transformation as major economic, social, and political systems must be reconfigured in her daughter’s lifetime. She imparts to her child that “more than any other time in history, what you choose from the past will need to be meticulously studied and selected,” (22) suggesting that her daughter “find a way to break *with* me rather than to break *from* me” (23). In her impassioned prose, Singh impresses the

necessity of the eponymous breaks, that another world will never be possible unless we break from the one that has raised us.

The Breaks models the paradigm shifts that Singh hopes her daughter will navigate. Singh flows from expressing the urgency of this work to where the project, and her daughter, can find their origins by tracing the relationship between Singh and her daughter's father, Nathan. Breaking from the pressures of heteronormativity, Singh articulates their relationship as "*friends-in-love*" (37) despite passing under conventional standards of legibility. Yet, Singh and Nathan continue to break down heteronormative arrangements and queer them, reconfiguring their home through the framework of "*adjacent living . . . wrestl[ing] with whether to call [their] experiment an act of *living together apart*, or of *living apart together*" (42). Queering their living spaces leads Singh to examine the dominant societal norms and narratives baked into architecture. Singh reflects on how the built environment is structured by history, noting how "in the American South, the architectures that have housed us are imprinted with histories of slavery and racialized servitude" (50). She considers the points of divisions in these spaces themselves, wherein "some bodies move through and around [these] space[s] comfortably, while others are made to feel alien" (50–1).*

Just as violent histories inform the spaces where they occurred, Singh notes how violent experiences inform one's lived pain, reckoning with the generational trauma that led her and her siblings to "[forge] bonds with the outside world and [abandon] each other." Singh turns her focus to the corporeal, recognizing the indelible ways her body has experienced life, and as a result, been broken and remade. Juxtaposing her lifelong health challenges and Brownness with the joy of her pregnancy—all housed in her body—Singh reckons with the breaks her body has endured, and the transformation that follows.

While much of the essay was written before the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning that occurred in summer 2020, Singh concludes *The Breaks* with reflections on the impact of these world-altering events from the vantage point of her family's life in downtown Richmond, Virginia, an epicenter of antiracist protest. She recounts how a colleague once impressed upon her students that "even when protests appear to have no political effect, there is a crucial *feeling* in the act of gathering, of being together in a set of beliefs despite all other differences, that can be vital to bolstering individuals in times of crisis" (113). Singh acknowledges the challenges to those gatherings: a pandemic, racial divisions, space itself; nonetheless, she sees "promise in [her daughter's] ability to craft kinships, to be a support for and supported by the worlds [she helps] shape, however unconventional they may be" (119). Despite the harm and violence of the last two years, Singh remains hopeful that "the pandemic is hailing us toward an ethics that is so much wider and more capacious than we have known" (147). *The Breaks* is more than a love letter

to her daughter, more than a memoir, more than a reflection on the current historical moment; through dazzling prose, transcendent structure, and wide-reaching theory, Singh offers us guidance on how to navigate the world we live in and map out a new one. In the wake of a torrent of institutional violence towards marginalized people, *The Breaks* shows us how to break from it and build something better. *The Breaks* is a genre-bending work of nonfiction, contributing productively to queer studies and public humanities while remaining accessible to non-academic audiences. Ethnographers, queer historians, ethnic studies scholars, and anyone invested in radical parenthood will find this book generative for their thinking and writing.

Author Information

Pavithra Suresh

Pavithra Suresh is a PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University and is currently a graduate fellow with the Center for Humanities Research. She is working on her dissertation about crises of despair in the South Asian American community of Research Triangle, NC.

[View all of Pavithra Suresh's articles.](#)

Article details

Pavithra Suresh, "Review of *The Breaks: An Essay* by Julietta Singh (Coffee House Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.22>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* by Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò (Haymarket Books / Pluto Press)

by Hunter Hilinski | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT The discourse surrounding identity politics has become fraught with misunderstanding and co-optation by forces across the political spectrum. What was once a radical discourse initiated by the queer, Black, and Indigenous feminists of the Combahee River Collective has become a movement defined by incapacity, stigmatization, and misinterpretation. Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò sets out to clarify the nature of the identity politics movement and its relationship to the powerful institutions and individuals which have misappropriated the original radicalism of this idea to serve their own political gains. Through a materialist and narrative approach to identity politics and social critique, Táíwò argues that the problem is not with identity politics as such, but a specific power called “elite capture,” which stifles the potential latent in identity politics and genuine leftist social organizing. He concludes that, rather than deferring responsibility and accepting symbolic gestures of empty representation, we must begin to construct a new politics and a new house altogether.

KEYWORDS capitalism, activism, democracy, organizing, materialism, identity politics, elites

Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else) By Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022. 168 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-642596-88-5. US List: \$16.95.

The social fabric of modern democracy is characterized much more by cracks and divisions than by unities and triumphs. Indeed, one could easily argue that given the dark colonial history of Western democracy, this has always been the case. The age of social media, however, has accelerated the perceived sectarianism of contemporary social life, creating convenient echo chambers and fragmenting collectivities—a phenomenon which plays directly into the hands of a devout partisan media elite. The buzzword surrounding much of this discourse, conveniently placed onto the agenda of most liberal political positions by their conservative counterparts, is the term *identity politics*. Although the

tenor of these debates have taken on a near-conspiratorial and warped, immaterial air, their material effects are in fact quite significant.

In his much-anticipated book, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò provides a freshly nuanced and materialist perspective to the discourse surrounding identity politics and leftist social organizing. Táíwò makes two central claims in his book. The first is about a social and political phenomenon, borrowed from the sphere of international aid, that Táíwò calls “elite capture.” In its most abstract form, elite capture refers to “a kind of system of behavior—a phenomenon articulated at the population level, an observable pattern of actions involving individuals, groups, and subgroups” (10). More concretely, Táíwò says, referencing economist Diya Dutta, elite capture deals with the unequal access to power across much of society and consequently the inability to redistribute this power and these resources appropriately (23). Táíwò defines the term “elite” relationally and historically, describing it as existing “in a particular context, between a smaller group of people and a larger group of people” (22). Elite capture is a specific moment meant to illustrate how “political projects can be hijacked—in principle or in effect—by the well positioned and better resourced” (23). Táíwò’s definition encompasses both the structures dictating the allocation of material goods *and* the system of cultural, ideological, and interpersonal relations these structures go on to produce. These include the university, liberal democratic institutions, social movements, “keyboard warriors,” and so on. Accordingly, “almost everything in our social world has a tendency to fall prey to elite capture” (21).

The second argument made by Táíwò is a critique of “deference politics,” a prime example of which is the call to “listen to the most affected” or “center the most marginalized” (69). This strategy is especially ubiquitous in the circles of liberal academia and leftist social activism. Táíwò, it should be noted, is not opposed to the necessity of uplifting the voices of the marginalized and socially maligned, but he seeks to show how this approach has been captured by elites and transformed into something ultimately self-congratulating, self-sabotaging, and destructively passive. The theme of the book’s main argumentative chapters “Reading the Room,” “Being in the Room,” and “Building a New House,” builds on the metaphor of “rooms” as the socially and historically imposed spaces we actively occupy. In organizing, he argues, we should not only be concerned with the control we exercise inside the rooms themselves—either communicatively by “passing the mic” or performatively by momentarily “stepping back”—but also with a necessary “external strategy” which lies outside any given room or set of interpersonal relationships (74). The deferential strategy allows for the redistribution of short-term attention, for example when the white person passes the mic to the person of color in the room, but this short-term gratification can mask the essential power relations by obscuring the overall power

dynamics of the room and the whole room's relationship to the category of "people of color" more broadly. (75).

As opposed to the former, deferential strategy, which sheds personal responsibility and falls victim to *symbolic* short-term gestures now appropriated by liberal politics, Táíwò prioritizes the latter, external strategy, and frames this as a type of "constructive politics." Deference politics absolves its adherents of responsibility, which creates fertile conditions for "virtue hoarding" on the left, and for the blurring of potentially radical discourses (as identity politics originally was, dating back to the Combahee River Collective's 1977 manifesto) by the forces of white supremacy on the right. Failing to embrace the necessity of this external strategy leaves movements vulnerable to two distinct strategies employed by elite forces: (a) symbolic identity politics and (b) the rebranding (not replacing) of existing institutions. Examples of the first trend can be found in the brutal tactics employed by police against Washington, D.C. Black Lives Matter protestors on a street painted "Black Lives Matter" by the mayor in 2020; the "Humans of CIA" recruitment ads which targeted multiple minority, queer, and Indigenous groups; or Nancy Pelosi and her fellow democrats kneeling while draped in scarves with Ghanaian *kente* designs following the death of George Floyd.¹ All three events merely clothe the actions of brutality with the language of progressive identity, seeking only to reinforce power through symbols and disregarding the material reality of their inherent violence. These contradictions point, in many ways, to the negation of difference once central to the radical power of identity politics.

As I stated above, Táíwò views navigation within the rooms as a still necessary task of good political organizing, acknowledging that identity politics has "equipped people, organizations, and institutions with a new vocabulary to describe their politics and aesthetic" (9). His creative weaving of leftist scholar activists like E. Franklin Frazier, Carter Godwin Woodson, Amílcar Cabral, and Paulo Freire illustrates the robust yet often hidden narratives still seeking light in these social spaces we traverse and recreate. Rather than allowing us to simply occupy new spaces within the room, however, Táíwò and the above authors represent a genuine call to the outside, toward horizons of collectivity informed by the past and the present. One might notice that there are moments in the book where these weaving narratives clash or become too enmeshed, but overall this narrative device proves to be one of the more powerful streams of the book's consciousness, embodying the potentials still latent in the room while generating a call to an outside beyond the symbolic or socially integrated. This motive is pushed ever further by the at-times conversational (though never unserious) manner of the book's cadence. In a style akin to the socio-poetic works of thinkers like Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Táíwò embraces the possibilities of the text as its own type of social space. An activity capable of both displaying social contradictions while simultaneously generating a poetic call for political action. Look, for example, at the similarities between the quotes below, the first taken from

Elite Capture, and the second from an interview in the last chapter of Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons*.

Táíwò: "What about right now? How did you and I get here, interacting across this page? I could, after all, like many other people in the world, have simply read and thought about all these issues on my own. I could even have spoken to my friends and colleagues about them. But that would not give me the power to speak to *you*." (62).

Moten and Harney: "Recognizing that text is intertext is one thing. *Seeing that text as a social space is another*...terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter that social space. But once you enter that social space, terms are just a part of it. There are things to do, places to go, and people to see in reading and writing – and it's about maybe even trying to figure out some kind of ethically responsible way to be in that world with other things."²

This socio-poetic sociality, I believe, lends itself to the final remarks on culture that Táíwò makes in the book—a culture that would ally the building of a new house from the localized anticapitalist struggles of organized and revolutionary social groups. Thus, the narrative approach of Táíwò's, while receiving criticism from orthodox Marxists for eschewing the more traditional Marxist terminology of production and accumulation, still suggests a deep materialism. As Táíwò writes in response to a critical review of the book by John-Baptiste Oduor, who argues Táíwò encourages a conclusion that the bad choices of individuals are wholly to blame for our condition, "*Elite Capture's* most central idea" is that elite capture is not a conspiracy, it is much bigger than the moral successes or failures of an individual or group.³ Overcoming the conspiratorial glare generated by the co-optation of identity politics is central to recapturing its radical potential.

As with any theoretical analysis, we are left to wonder about the prospects for genuine actualization. There are few texts, if any, which have ever succeeded in realizing this disparity between the theoretical and the active. What's more, given Táíwò's specific focus on identity politics, one can be sure that there is more ground work to be done on clarifying the nature of elite capture in all realms of our social, political, and economic lives before the work of actualization can get off the ground. In short, we must continue to understand the *everything else* alluded to in the book's title before a critique of elite capture can be expressed in its entirety. However, in a moment defined by the incapacitation of critical thought and the lack of practical political alternatives which move beyond the existing and into the possible, Táíwò's contribution proves invaluable and timely.

Notes

1. "Why were US Democrats wearing Ghana's kente cloth?" *BBC News*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52978780> < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52978780>> . ↩

2. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 108. ↩
 3. "Is It Worth It? A Conversation with Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò and John Baptiste-Oduor," *Jacobin*, July 10, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/07/elite-capture-review-response> <
<https://jacobin.com/2022/07/elite-capture-review-response/>> . ↩
-

Author Information

Hunter Hilinski

Hunter Hilinski is a PhD student in political science at the University of California, Irvine. He holds bachelor's degrees in political science and philosophy from Wilkes University, and a master's degree in political science from Colorado State University. His research focuses are in German political thought, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, race and ethnic politics, psychoanalysis, and environmental studies. Currently, he is writing on the Utopian materialism of Ernst Bloch and tracing the colonial history of coffee to modern myth making. He is also a proud UAW (United Auto Workers) union organizer and an avid football (soccer) fan.

[View all of Hunter Hilinski's articles.](#)

Article details

Hunter Hilinski, "Review of *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (Haymarket Books / Pluto Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.21>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture* by Lee Artz (Routledge)

by Brittney Jimenez-Bayardo | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Lee Artz's *Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture* brings to our attention the ways transnational media has created representations of global culture. By analyzing examples of nations with transnational media networks he acknowledges how each nation's media culture has become a reflection of transnational ideals. Artz critiques the transnational ideals that benefit elites and the careful fusing of the themes such as self-interest, social mobility, and individual successes into media to maintain the status quo. The book concludes with a plea for a non-capitalist international movement to bring forth a new media wave, which might benefit the interests of humanity.

KEYWORDS media, capitalism, culture, political economy

Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture. By Lee Artz. New York, NY Routledge, 2022, 260 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-75417-4. US List: \$44.95

In *Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture*, Lee Artz engages our understanding of transnational media networks and how they have led to the creation of a global culture. Artz begins by unpacking contemporary capitalism and its social implications and then discussing the impact of cultural imperialism and transnationalism. The following chapters each explore a distinct geographic location and its media, examining partnerships and intertwining themes created in each medium. These themes explore messages or cultural values that media outlets promote through their stories and production to their intended audience. He ends with an argument about transnational media as a producer of global culture, including cultural consumption.

The first chapter, "Global Entertainment: Not Yet the Democratic Age," begins by identifying media structures and the distribution networks of entertainment, such as movies, television programming, and news frames. Though media has changed over time, particularly with the addition of streaming, commercial media outlets continue to build themes aimed at instituting social norms in communities. Artz argues that messages emanating from

TNMCs (transnational media corporations) define global entertainment and global culture. Partnerships amongst enterprises in various nations are increasing, as are the ideals they seek to embed into their communities. For instance Artz discusses individualistic ideals such as independence, personal needs, and profit. Media production teams impact a large workforce and viewership across borders and classes. Control of the media is thus central to control of power.

The second chapter, "Cultural Imperialism and Transnational Media," focuses on perspectives of transnational media from media industry owners, managers and politicians. Artz unpacks the overall culture produced by capitalism as a result of these stakeholders. Artz argues that the neoliberal push centers on themes of self-interest and expansion. By looking at examples of transnational media in India, China, Latin America, and Europe, Artz argues that media corporations in these nations developed in similar ways to create an overarching "global culture." For instance, the transnational capitalist class seeks to convey messages of growth and serving one's self-interests, but limits growth to benefit capitalism and to not question social inequities. The transnational capitalist class (TNCC) seeks to maximize profits by exploiting domestic labor from the working class within nations, justifying cross-border production. As media owners produce information and influence the cultural norms of the community, TNCCs disperse these normative ideas across borders and cultural identities.

In the next chapter, "Media in India: From Public to Private to Transnational," emphasizes India as one of the largest markets that embraced neoliberalism under elite Indian capitalist groups. This move privatized large industries and opened the media to foreign investments. Media became transnationally connected and investment driven, moving away from public interest to investor interest. The restructuring of the media meant conglomerates with capital had the ability to overtake the industry, transforming the film industry into a new national identity that evoked images of colorful films, complex dancing, and musicals. As such, dominant themes in Indian media have become consistent with liberal Western media values: critiquing inequality while maintaining systems that thrive on inequity.

Chapter 4, "Crouching Tigers: Transnational Media in and from China," focuses on China as a transnational economic power. Over the last thirty years, the Chinese government introduced a national culture consisting of elites' economic and political agendas. As such, dominant transnational ideologies have benefited elite agenda-setters and the transnational systems of capitalism. The growth of cinema in China has been led by these same ideals and helped consolidate their messages into a collective "cultural" identity. The Chinese government controls content that promotes its ideals and homogenizes its messages. Artz finds that China's joint ventures with TNMCs adapt the messages of transnational organizations to fit within the national media constraints but ultimately

reproduce the same global culture that TMNCs promote. Government oversight has meant that the TNMCs must navigate both capitalism and nationalism within the Chinese media industry.

Chapter 5, "Latin America from Telenovelas to Transnational Media," engages the impact of colonization across Latin America and the ways the United States continues to impact media in the region. Due to colonization, Latin American countries have struggled to create an independent media culture as they remain impacted by colonial interests. Transnational media dominated by Western ideals have proliferated across Latin America to homogenize identities and cultural norms encoded into media. Artz ties this homogenization to a need to divert attention from existing social inequalities. The entertainment media has focused on stories that depict individuals "overcoming" traits viewed as undesirable, such as those associated with lower social classes, rather than calling for systemic changes. By examining the popular Latin American telenovela genre, Artz asserts that social conventions are embedded in this media, creating dominant universal themes, such as upward social mobility, national pride, and material successes, across Latin America. TNMCs produce a "diverse" world to embody their desire for individual consumerism and for workers to believe the messages they receive via media to reproduce capitalist interests.

Chapter 6, "The New Frontiers of Europe: Transnational Media Partnerships," discusses the European Union's transnational media's attempt to build a diverse and unified European culture. The diverse cultures across the EU collaborations raise the question of whose beliefs and interests these media messages serve? Entertainment industries in the EU took on partnerships with those in the US to adapt their media forms to meet the needs of their privatized media, and partnerships have primarily sought to financially benefit investors and media companies. These transnational projects have created one of Europe's most key media forms: the television miniseries. The messages within miniseries mirror those found in other transnational partnerships but adapted in a way that serves EU consumers.

The final chapter, "The Hegemonic Appeal of Spectacle and Diversity," elaborates on the links between transnational media, capitalism, and the countries' national and regional political economies. Artz argues that entertainment and media contain and reproduce social norms and conventions that become hegemonic as they are incorporated in each nation's media. The spreading of these norms can be linked to those invested in its maintenance: investors, and national or governmental networks. Artz also acknowledges that many of these norms can easily be accommodated because of countries' similar colonial rules that initiated these norms. Transnational capitalism is not loyal to any country but rather is enforced by the governments which stand to benefit from its maintenance.

Artz ends the book with a thoughtful call to action for a non-capitalist international movement to resist current media.

Overall, through carefully curated examples of transnational media, Artz supports his compelling argument that transnational media networks have built alliances that distribute hegemonic social norms while remaining culturally relevant to their communities. Partnerships between TNMCs have also allowed their materials to be distributed to a larger consumer base. Through these TNMCs, transnational media can impose norms that maintain the status quo by portraying marginalized characters as having little power in fighting injustices. By consuming these norms and themes, viewers come to accommodate behaviors that benefit capitalism and governments gain the viewers' consent to impose them. The power of media cannot be underestimated.

Author Information



Brittney Jimenez-Bayardo

Brittney Jimenez-Bayardo is a second-year doctoral student at UC Santa Cruz's Latin American and Latino Studies Program. She has a background in ethnic studies and received her master's degree in 2021 from CSU Northridge in Chicana/o/x Studies. Her master's thesis, "Constructing Community: San Fernando Valley Youth and Community Activism," focused on the different routes through which youth become involved in social movements. Her current research looks at Chicana youth organizing, social movements, and the role of social media in building solidarities.

[View all of Brittney Jimenez-Bayardo's articles.](#)

Article details

Brittney Jimenez-Bayardo, "Review of *Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Culture* by Lee Artz (Routledge)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.20>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Review of *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* by Thy Phu (Duke University Press)

by Collin Hawley | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* draws on archives of the Vietnam War that center Vietnamese perspectives to complicate the historical and contemporary visual representation of Vietnamese identities that have been filtered through the Western narrative of the Vietnam War. Her book emphasizes the significance of typically denigrated visual materials including propaganda and vernacular photographs. She focuses on the complex deployment and reception of photographic objects as politicized symbols, sources of memorialization, and identity formation.

KEYWORDS postcolonialism, history, memory, war, diaspora, photography, identity, archive, visual culture

Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam. By Thy Phu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 248 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1075-3. US List: \$25.95.

The most well-known photographs of the Vietnam War are images of spectacular brutality and suffering. Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* examines an alternative, often quotidian archive that challenges these violent visions of the Vietnam War and Vietnam generally. Her effort is to expand the category of war photography beyond representations of spectacularized violence. To better understand Vietnam, she weaves together a variety of lesser known and private photographs that exemplify the eponymous, contradictory "warring visions."

In chapter 1, Phu deftly historicizes the complex history and use of photography as a tool for the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. She centers the chapter on the mythology of socialist Vietnamese photographers. She explains that during the war, cameras and film were in short supply, as this equipment could only be sourced from Vietnamese allies (East Germany and the USSR) or "liberated" from Western adversaries (41). She tells stories of photographers traveling for weeks or months to capture a single battle, swimming while

holding their gear above the water, sneaking through dangerous territory, and developing and printing photographs in an underground darkroom with water scavenged from puddles in bomb craters. The tenor of these anecdotes is one of tenacity and adaptation. Accordingly, the stylistic ethos of socialist visual culture is one of recycling and resourcefulness. The second key element of this chapter is the use of photographic manipulation. Vietnamese photographers on both sides of the war have garnered controversy through manipulating images. Manipulation is often represented as the antithesis of documentary photojournalism, propaganda. However, citing the work of Mathew Brady, Phu emphasizes that manipulation is historically central to war photography. Phu also explains that the label of propaganda dissolves the possibility of useful critique. Instead, propagandistic work deserves to be analyzed seriously rather than oversimplified because it nevertheless figures into forming “ways of seeing” (17). The mythologization of socialist photographers functioned as a tool to create a clear national image of socialist Vietnam. Phu, through her measured analysis of these myths and photographic manipulation, emphasizes how photography is deployed to construct these ways of seeing and politically efficacious narratives.

Chapter 2 explores the multifarious deployment of the Vietnamese revolutionary woman as a symbol. During the war, this symbol was taken up by a variety of groups, including both the North and South Vietnamese governments and various anti-war feminist groups in the West. Each group had conflicting purposes that did not adhere to the intentions of the revolutionaries themselves. Phu explains that this misrecognition and the concomitant “friction” was nonetheless productive in developing and cementing socialist ways of seeing. Furthermore, she explains that the symbolization/objectification of Vietnamese women does not necessarily diminish their actual efforts in the war but simultaneously represents “a pivotal tactic for asserting cultural influence” (89). Solidarity among anti-war groups was established around the visual motif of motherhood. She begins the chapter by contrasting the visual presentation of two prominent Vietnamese revolutionary women, Madame Binh from the North and Madame Nhu from the South. Madame Nhu’s self-presentation was militarized, centered on the all-female militia that she established. On the other hand, Madame Binh self-consciously displayed traditional, gentle femininity. The enduring image of the Vietnamese woman revolutionary is the image cultivated by Madame Binh and the socialist Vietnamese Women’s Union. Phu concludes the chapter by exploring the contradictory solidarity established between various anti-war groups across the globe and the revolutionaries in Vietnam. Though the Western anti-war women’s groups advocated for peace through pacifism instead of peace through struggle, they united around the Vietnamese woman revolutionary as a maternal symbol: “Madame Binh tenderly wrapped the message of military necessity in the soothing folds of maternity” (110). For Phu, this textual mediation and re-articulation explains how pacifist movements justified their use of the fiercely militant imagery of Vietnamese women.

In chapter 3, Phu analyzes the practice of war reenactment. The object at the center of the chapter is a photo book by An-My Lê that captured a reenactment of the Vietnam War in Virginia entitled *Small Wars*. The practice of war reenactment and the images that are made around the events represent another expansion of war photography's "warring visions" into the realm of speculative and revisionist history. Furthermore, contrary to typical war reenactments, which are primarily composed of white participants, Vietnam War reenactments often attract participants of color. Phu explains that the indexical medium of photography shapes the practice of memorialization: "Photographs activate memory—photographs of reenactments encode multiple temporalities, the past and the present, an imagined past that is experienced as "real"—and map out palimpsestic spaces" (137). She juxtaposes reenactment photography's amalgamation of imagination and history alongside the persistent debate around what constitutes an authentic visual representation of war. She argues that the practice of war reenactments exemplifies the importance of staged and manipulated photographs to the memorialization of the Vietnam War and the development of diasporic Vietnamese identity. She explains that these photographs prompt an "infinite series of further encounters" that serve to construct and reinforce the complex and contradictory identities and histories established around the object of the Vietnam War (123).

Chapter 4 explores the role of both present and absent family photographs in the development of Vietnamese diasporic identity. Phu continues her expansion of definitions in this chapter by interrogating the flexibility of family photographs. She describes the familial appropriation of photographs intended for instrumental uses. The refugee identification photograph, intended as a tool for state surveillance, is a photograph often included in diasporic Vietnamese photo albums including her own. She also expands the category of family photographs to include missing or destroyed photographs, as many refugee families lost or destroyed their albums. The family album represents a reclamation of identity from a variety of sources: public, private, material, and immaterial. The latter half of the chapter takes on disconnected, dissolved, and "orphaned" family photographs that are often found in antique stores in Vietnam. She closely analyzes the album of a soldier commemorating his military education and friendships that she discovered in one such store. This album obviously stretches the definition of "family"; however, Phu explains that these banal fraternal photographs represent warring visions that subvert spectacular representations of the Vietnam War. She closes the chapter by discussing the bricolage "orphan" photograph installations of a Vietnamese artist, Dinh Q. Lê. He weaves together family photographs discovered in antique stores into semi-transparent curtains, boxes, and other objects that emphasize the immensity of what has been lost. Simultaneously, he created a digital archive of the images that prompts viewers to identify any that they recognize. She emphasizes the exhibit's work to reconnect to a vanished history. The family photograph usefully expands the narrative of the Vietnam War beyond

spectacularized violence to quotidian, human, and most crucially, Vietnamese stories of persistence and survival.

Phu's *Warring Visions* is an effective examination of the multifarious ways that the tool of photography signifies. She urges her readers to reexamine one of the most visually saturated wars apart from the Western, dominant lens. Rejecting the pessimism of Sontag and other photography critics, she mines the deep complexity of her archive to create nuanced, plural narratives of Vietnam. *Warring Visions* is valuable for anyone interested in visual culture, archival studies, and diasporic identity against the grain of Western visions of imperialism.

Author Information



Collin Hawley

Collin Hawley holds a Bachelor of Arts in photography and film studies as well as a Master of Arts in humanities with a concentration in cultural studies from Milligan University in Johnson City, TN. His research draws heavily from his practical experience with analog photography and examines the intersection of vision, power, gender, sexuality, and subject formation through visual technologies. Currently he is a doctoral student in George Mason's cultural studies program.

[View all of Collin Hawley's articles.](#)

Article details

Collin Hawley, "Review of *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* by Thy Phu (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.19>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Review of *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* by Allison Page (University of Minnesota Press)

by Michael L. Thomas | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT In *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery*, Allison Page interrogates how media culture from the 1960s to the present has mobilized the legacy of slavery for affective governance, or “the production and management of affect and emotion to align with governing rationalities” (6). Throughout the book, Page’s analysis succeeds in providing a rich mapping of the converging interests of state actors, media producers, educational organizations, and other stakeholders as they narrate their own desire to manage emotions in the wake of the civil rights movement and to maintain white supremacist order.

KEYWORDS media, affect, slavery, racialization, white supremacy, anti-radicalism

Media and the Affective Life of Slavery. By Allison Page. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 196 pp. (digital). ISBN 978-1-5179-1040-2. \$26 (paperback).

In *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery*, Allison Page interrogates how media culture from the 1960s to the present has mobilized the legacy of slavery for affective governance, or “the production and management of affect and emotion to align with governing rationalities” (6). On Page’s account, “the shift to official antiracism in the wake of World War II and the civil rights movement(s) required a modification in subject and racial formation” that “reveal[s] whiteness’s adaptive maneuvers to contain antiracist activism threatening the dominance of white supremacy” (4). Page traces these maneuvers through a historical exploration of the documentary, the miniseries, educational video games, and digital platforms as sites at which “media and the visual—alongside policy, political discourse, consumer culture, and curricula—provide templates for racial subjectivity through producing and disciplining emotion” (3). The book is divided into four chapters, two of which map the forms of affective governance that emerged in televised media from the 1960s and 70s, and two of which trace the inheritance of these forms in contemporary digital media. Each of these chapters provides a rich structural account of the integration of state, media, and educational architecture in the drive towards generating a popular

discourse and corresponding emotional framework to contain forces aimed at radical social change.

In chapter 1, "The Restless Black Peril," Page argues that documentaries such as 1968's *Of Black America* inaugurated a period of racial formation grounded in techniques of "emotional management" (19–20) through a "discourse of sobriety" (21) that presented white objectivity as a solution to pathological Black rage. In this framework, the legacy of slavery is deployed to frame a heritage of "Black anger," stoking fears of insurrection and unrest (37) as they simultaneously attempt to present an image of Black people as victimized, though the victimizer is never named. The crucial elements of this chapter are the documented evidence of corporate and state interest in the production of these documentaries as a strategy of profiting from racial difference by shifting the terms of the debate in ways that align with reformist politics and the "culture of poverty" thesis that dominated racial discourse of the time.

Chapter 2, "Feeling Slavery: *Roots* and the Pedagogies of Emotion," extends this analysis of state and corporate mobilization of emotion into education. It also highlights a shift from the *policing* of emotion to the *production* of forms of emotion that reconfigure Blackness and whiteness in line with liberal multicultural politics. Page's analysis in this chapter, however, strays from the television miniseries *Roots* to a concern with its framing in classrooms by the National Education Association, school boards, and media companies invested in *Roots* as a profitable tool for cultural development through its *affective impact* (70). In teaching materials, for example, Page shows that teachers are prompted to focus on Black (and white) students' feelings of shame or pride in their heritage rather than addressing the economic and political legacies of slavery in the 1970s, including increasing levels of Black poverty and segregation. Understanding one's heritage and taking pride in one's survival, argues Page, became a proxy for political action.

The final two chapters move from television to the digital realm and provide the book's strongest analysis. Page's rich description of digital platforms draws out how game mechanics encourage the practice of neoliberal agency and how web platforms can be mobilized to present conscious consumerism as a form of radical action. Chapter 3 presents *Flight to Freedom*, an interactive video game in which students are asked to "immerse" themselves (80) in the experience of an enslaved person through a series of "small quotidian choices" that sanitize the history of violence and precarity experienced (99). Page's analysis of *Freedom* is some of the strongest of the book, as she maps how the game frames agency in terms of compromised resistance and personal responsibility. This framing focuses on agency as an end rather than a starting point for a historical understanding of the conditions of slavery that would challenge the idea of docile Black subjects.

Chapter 4 turns to the website "Slavery Footprint," to trace how affective governance gives way to algorithmic governance, which Page defines as "the "capture, co-ordination and capitalization of data" to manage and govern populations by automated systems that "[regulate] the flows of [our] data and information" (103). Here, data plays the role of the expert, as in the case of the documentary form, providing a "color blind" basis to equate twenty-first-century slavery with chattel slavery and to present data as the solution that would reform corporate practices. Users are asked to participate in the site by demanding companies learn where their products are made and by whom so that they change their productive habits. The site thus aligns the consumer with the corporation as white subjects who, freed of their ignorance, can make ethical decisions, "leav[ing] unexamined the ways that racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism render certain populations 'vulnerable' to poverty, crime, discrimination, and even the effects of climate change" (119). Page explains, "Exploitation is relegated to the realm of 'forced' labor; instead of viewing exploitation as foundational for capitalism" (119). On the level of affect, feeling is funneled through the objectivity of data and one relieves their guilt through the colonial impulse of having "saved" a racialized other (107–8).

Throughout the book, Page's analysis succeeds in providing a rich mapping of the converging interests of state actors, media producers, educational organizations, and other stakeholders as they narrate their own desire to manage emotions in the wake of the civil rights movement and to maintain white supremacist order. At the same time, Page's theorizations of whiteness often presume the success of the racial project conducted by the media. For example, her description of Stokely Carmichael's appearance in "Black Power, White Backlash" offers clear framing in terms of a white liberal gaze, but lacks evidence from reviews or commentary that would show that this rendering translated to audiences of the time. In addition, we often lack detail on how media objects themselves introduce the affective structures that Page identifies. In the *Roots* chapter, for example, there is a rich description of the function of melodrama and the miniseries as a genre, but there are few examples from *Roots* itself beyond a brief overview in the opening of the chapter of its reframing of Black freedom. However, Page's broad mapping of the media landscape provides an important guide for tracing the counterrevolutionary politics undertaken by media, educational authorities, and the state, which future work in media studies can continue to model.

Author Information

Michael L. Thomas

Michael L. Thomas is a University Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Formerly, He was an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow in the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and Assistant Professor of Philosophy and coordinator of Africana Studies at Susquehanna University. His research explores the aesthetic dimension of social life, investigating the use of aesthetic experience for theorizing empirical social relationships and the construction of societies as a collective, aesthetic endeavor. He has published work in *Philosophy and Literature*, *Social Theory*, *Critical Philosophy of Race*, and *Amerikastudien*.

[View all of Michael L. Thomas's articles.](#)

Article details

Michael L. Thomas, "Review of *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* by Allison Page (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.18>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice* by Hilda Lloréns (University of Washington Press)

by Donna Elizabeth Hayles | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT This review examines Hilda Lloréns's research into the role that Afro-Puerto Rican women play in advocating for environmental justice and building a sustainable environment in the Puerto Rican archipelago, particularly after the devastation left behind by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, and the subsequent catastrophic effects of COVID-19 in 2020. Lloréns shows that Afro-Puerto Rican women are able to survive in the face of racial and ecological discriminations and marginalizations, and their survival is emblematic of Puerto Rico's own survival. The author devotes the entirety of her book to show that as an "ethnographer of home," as she calls herself, it is essential for people to create livable worlds within which they can survive. Survival in the midst of catastrophic climate change is difficult, Lloréns argues, primarily because Puerto Ricans are often on the receiving end of austerity measures that make their existence tenuous, at best. These austerity measures typically come after a climatic event, and result in limited access to clean water, food, electricity, healthcare, housing, and education, which only serve to exacerbate the desperation that many on the island feel. While this desperation was widespread across the island after the hurricanes in 2017, residents in the southeastern region of the island (predominantly Afro-Puerto Ricans) were even more affected. Lloréns shows how these people used their limited resources to cull an existence out of a seemingly hostile land and create a community that sustained them. Lloréns draws on personal experiences, the experiences of her family, ethnography, anthropology, and interviews to show how vital it is to examine Puerto Rico not as a homogenous space but rather as a heterogeneous one with its unique complexities. And by centering the work and experiences of Black Puerto Ricans, Lloréns gives voice to a group that is largely left on the margins of society, but who demonstrates the importance of building community as a sustaining entity.

KEYWORDS climate, feminism, colonialism, environment, racial capitalism, justice, Puerto Rico

Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice.
By Hilda Lloréns. University of Washington Press, 2022, 207 pp. ISBN 978-0-295-74940-2. US List: \$30.00.

After Hurricanes Irma and Maria tore through Puerto Rico in a two-week span in September 2017, they left in their wake a devastated island and a people struggling to put their lives back together with the limited resources they had. Puerto Rico further made national news when then-President Donald Trump, after declaring a state of emergency in the island, visited a relief shelter, threw paper towel rolls at the crowd, and dismissively joked that Puerto Rico was an unexpected burden on the federal budget. The COVID-19 pandemic only served to exacerbate the complexity of Puerto Rico's dire situation a few years later, creating an economic faultline separating the island from the continental United States.

Hilda Lloréns's *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice* unflinchingly examines the dismissive attitude that both the US federal government and the local government of Puerto Rico adopted then—and continue to embrace now—in their treatment of the poor, primarily the large population of Black or Afro-Puerto Ricans, located in the southeastern region of the island. Lloréns's text intersects her personal experiences as a cultural anthropologist with those of Black Puerto Ricans on the island who band together to cope within the untenable spaces that they are forced to live in, as well as to create livable worlds for themselves. As they seek to come to terms with a society that marginalizes their experiences and their presence, Afro-Puerto Rican women have learned to work in solidarity to "live within [the] turbulent ongoingness" of disenfranchisement and marginalization (12). Born in Puerto Rico, but raised in Connecticut, Lloréns is laser-focused on revealing how Black Puerto Rican women's lives are tied to the survival of Puerto Rico itself. While the oppression and exploitation they face is unconscionable, their resilience allows them to endure in the face of great adversity. The author's core argument is that the devastation and dispossession that marginalized Afro-Puerto Ricans have endured is fodder for their strength, and she invites us to see the importance of building supportive communities and creating environmentally just spaces (18).

Lloréns's methodology draws on autobiography, memories, ethnography, anthropology, interviews, and history, resulting in rich and detailed research that outlines the role Black Puerto Rican women have in advancing ecofeminist alternatives to preserving and advancing the position of the Puerto Rican archipelago and its diaspora. As an "ethnographer of home," as Lloréns calls herself, her text presents a much-needed contribution to the ongoing dialogue about Puerto Rican history, the ways in which Black Puerto Ricans are racialized, marginalized, and stigmatized, and the perpetuation of the myth of the archipelago as a drain on the resources of the US federal government. Drawing from extensive interviews and time spent in Puerto Rico—what she refers to as the scholar-

activist model—Lloréns outlines the significant contributions that the poor in Puerto Rico make to their own wellbeing, as well as that of the island. The stories that Lloréns recounts serve as evidence of the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the island that takes place, as well as the pollution that foreign entities (endorsed and supported by the local government) perpetrate on the fragile environment of the island. For Lloréns, since the dispossessed poor in Puerto Rico are the ones who stand to lose the most, they are the ones who have the most to teach in combating the “ravenous capitalist extractivism, racialized dispossession and ecocide” that dominate and continue to devastate the Puerto Rican archipelago (10).

Each chapter of Lloréns’s text presents a significant aspect of the ways Black Puerto Rican women navigate the “turbulent ongoingness” of living within the archipelago’s unstable, uncertain, and fragile ecosystem (12). Chapter 1, “Surviving Matriarchal Dispossession,” provides the reader with an examination of the fragmented geographic, political, and emotional ties that connect Afro-Puerto Rican women to the land. For Lloréns, these women’s lives are marked by a social structure she calls “dispossessed matriarchy” where their gender and race are components that contribute to their oppression and dispossession. By centering the experiences of Afro-Puerto Rican women, Lloréns challenges the ontological discourse of matriarchal dispossession.

The title of chapter 2, “Doing Home-Work in the Motherland,” establishes Lloréns as a “native” anthropologist who is keenly aware of the conflict that she experiences in exploring the history of her native country from the perspective of someone from mainland America (46). As a native anthropologist, Lloréns explores the idea of belonging and who possesses the right and privilege to tell the stories of the land. As both an insider (Lloréns was born in Puerto Rico) and an outsider (Lloréns emigrated when she was thirteen), the author is aware of the problematic space she occupies in seeking to “decoloniz[e] and undisciplin[e]” herself and her homeland from the colonizing narrative of Puerto Rico (14).

In chapter 3, “Life-Affirming Practices,” Lloréns documents the role that Black women play in advocating for environmental, racial, and climatic justice in Puerto Rican archipelagic and diasporic spaces. As the author shows, these women have been largely ignored in the emergent literature, so by centering their stories in her work, she renders them visible even as she valorizes their contributions. These women recognize the importance of community work, especially when government assistance is slow in coming after a disaster like a hurricane. Lloréns highlights the Initiative for the Eco-development of the Jobos Bay Inc, (IDEBAJO), which “created and sustained sites of resistance through community work” (86). Women such as Ismenia, Leticia, and Carmen became involved with IDEBAJO once they realized that grassroots organizations were instrumental in protecting their communities. Ismenia became active in order to share her “quality-of-life ethos” with the

children in her community (110), Leticia helped to tend the community garden so that they could be “completely self-sustaining” (110), and Carmen helped to clear the debris after Hurricane Maria struck the island (114). Lloréns contends that all women shared a belief in “the value of their work and of their communities” (111), and used their limited resources to “resist subjugation and build meaningful and sustainable lives” (88).

In chapter 4, “Living with/in Ecological Catastrophe,” Lloréns contends that unless more is done to control greenhouse gas emissions, the global community faces an ecological disaster unlike anything seen before. For Lloréns, while each part of the world has its unique challenges, the history of the Americas is one of “raciological-ecological extractive” practices that have only fast-tracked their catastrophe (124). Colonialism, extractivism, and racial capitalism have engendered an accelerated effect of a world on the verge of ecological collapse, and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and drought, are evidence of a world that is out of control. Lloréns argues here that by engaging in a “deprovincialized conceptual and epistemological excavation” (126), we can begin the painful process of “shaping a more just, livable, inclusive, and sustainable” world (161).

In the Epilogue, “A Word about Black Puerto Rican Ecological Knowledge,” Lloréns ends her book with a commentary on Black ecological knowledge, arguing that in Puerto Rico “Black ways of living and of making sustainable lives” continue to flourish in the archipelago, despite their marginalized state (163). Evidence of this survival is presented in a group of “present-day maroons” she interviewed three months after Hurricane Maria destroyed their beachfront community. Lloréns documents her interaction with them and shows how their determination and self-sufficiency allowed them to craft practices that ensured their survival. These modern-day maroons, Lloréns contends, define their success in life through their ecological knowledge and their centuries-old relationship with the land.

The primary strength of Lloréns’s book rests in the intimacy that she brings to excavating the troubling environmental injustices Black Puerto Rican women have to live under even as they struggle against marginalization. Rather than presenting a totalizing conclusion of Puerto Rico’s situation, Lloréns adopts a responsive stance to her analysis of the injustices that the residents of Puerto Rico’s southeastern region face. Her observations and conclusions can be further extrapolated to our analysis of the Global South where the effects of colonialism, neoliberal austerity measures, environmental degradation, land dispossession, gentrification, and “increasingly callous federal economic policies” continue to resonate in the precarious lives of marginalized peoples in these spaces (11). By adding her voice to those advocating for environmental justice, Lloréns encourages us to reflect on our relationship with the environment and the ways in which the world around us is “coming into being” (12).

Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice is a timely and necessary examination of the growing crisis in environmental justice and other cultural issues such as gender, race, and the effects of colonialism. Lloréns's hard-hitting truths in this cultural anthropological text expose her antiracist, ecofeminist, decolonial approach to foregrounding the experiences of marginalized Black women in Puerto Rico. By amplifying the voices of this frequently silenced group, Lloréns provides a space where they are humanized and their voices heard. For the author, people who are often forced to live on the fringes of society—who are often banished from the public sphere—are invariably the ones who are more attuned to the silent cries of the land, and who have the most to teach us about living in harmony with the environment. It is they who know how best to “survive the onslaught” of an ecologically unstable space and turn it into one that is not only sustainable but is also “more just, livable, [and] inclusive” (161).

Author Information



Donna Elizabeth Hayles

Donna Elizabeth Hayles is an Associate Professor of English at SUNY Adirondack and a PhD candidate in English at the University at Albany. She earned her MPhil and BA in English from the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. Professor Hayles has taught for over twenty years in Jamaica and the United States. Her areas of interest include the representation of Black immigrant experiences in the US, the presentation of Caribbean practices in literature and popular culture, and the recuperation of the voice of the other in popular discourse. Her conference presentations include “Monsters and the Monstrous: Reimagining the ‘Other’ in *Beowulf*” (SUNY Albany), “The Contradictions of Identity in Esmerelda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*” (44th Annual Postgraduate Conference of the Society for Caribbean Studies, UK), and “Suss as Postcolonial and Postmodern Imperatives in Erna Brodber’s *Myal* and *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*” (University of Miami).

[View all of Donna Elizabeth Hayles's articles.](#)

Donna Elizabeth Hayles, "Review of *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice* by Hilda Lloréns (University of Washington Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.17>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* by Mila Zuo (Duke University Press)

by E. Nastacia Schmoll | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT In *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, Mila Zuo examines how female Chinese actors perform “vulgar beauty” as a way of “worlding” to create community and belonging through affective shocks, and specifically, to produce feelings of Chineseness. By using the sense of taste, and specifically the flavors bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour, as a framework, Zuo delves into close readings of television and cinematic case studies to look at the different ways vulgar beauty is deployed by these actors. In its analysis, this book offers a reconceptualization of feminine beauty outside of white western dictates and suggests that (vulgar) beauty can be utilized as a potentially disruptive and transformative force, specifically in destabilizing racial and patriarchal power structures.

KEYWORDS film studies, gender, race, vulgar, beauty, Chinese studies

Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium. By Mila Zuo. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 312 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478018117. US List \$27.95.

In *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium*, Mila Zuo examines how female Chinese actors perform “vulgar beauty” as a way of “worlding” to create community and belonging through affective shocks, and specifically, to produce feelings of Chineseness. Generally speaking, the Chinese body has often been portrayed as vulgar in western society and media, particularly associated with “amorality, disease, contamination, contagion, and pollution” (17). Chinese women in particular have had to “negotiate their public performativity under a persistent state of gendered, sexualized, and racialized uncertainty and contingency within trans/national contexts” (6). However, focusing on the aspect of “performativity,” Zuo argues that “vulgar beauty” can also be utilized as a mode of self-creation and a way to gain agency and control over narratives surrounding “Chineseness.” Zuo contends that the problem is not with beauty itself, but with the fact that we are unable “to recognize or admit it beyond conventional, categorical, and (white)

western definitions" (25) and that we cannot "apprehend its unseen, phenomenal impact" (36). She argues that we need to continue to critically interrogate the role vulgar beauty plays "in decentering and decolonizing western thought" (23) and recognize how "we are undone and remade by our contact with beauty" (36).

Zuo does this by framing her argument through the modality of taste to examine the question of a body's historically situated edibility. This use of taste departs from a western focus on visibility and instead works within Chinese etymological conceptions of beauty. Zuo uses the five flavors used in Chinese medicine—bitter, salty, pungent, sweet, and sour—to understand beauty "as something of the other that is tasted, consumed, and digested in order to arrive at the extra/sensorial dimensions of aesthetic difference, and to examine the matter of beauty—its vulgarity" (14). Throughout *Vulgar Beauty*, Zuo interweaves western and eastern philosophies to deploy "a new kind of (nonwesternized) deconstructive theory" that "grapples with the textures of linguistic indeterminacy as well as attending to ontoethical concerns within different cosmological orders" (22). She organizes *Vulgar Beauty's* five main chapters by devoting each one to an examination of the embodiment of a particular "flavor" of vulgar beauty through various cinematic case studies, moving through time from reform-era China to modern depictions of multiculturalism.

Chapter 1 offers close readings of Gong Li's performances in the films *Red Sorghum* (1988) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007) to highlight the bitter flavor of sensualized pain in post-Mao China and how this flavor "emerges as a traumatic reckoning with the past" (40). Zuo juxtaposes the seductive beauty of Gong with desexualized, "bland" socialist female star bodies, which work to embody the ideals of socialism despite the "destabilizing affective intensity" of the sociopolitical climate of the 1950s–70s permeated by bitterness (51). Gong embodies this bitterness through her vulgar beauty and draws our attention back to historical trauma.

Chapter 2 turns to Maggie Cheung's performance in the French art film *Irma Vep* (1996) and Joan Chen's performance in the cult US television series *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) as salty depictions of self-preservation and "aesthetic reconsolidations of national identity through multiculturalism" (34). These performances of "salty-cool" are used to negotiate "western infatuation with the Chinese femme's object-surface" and "racist and misogynistic heat" (74). In this film and series, Zuo argues that Chinese female bodies are utilized by white male directors to promote the vision of liberal politics of tolerance that posits that everyone (regardless of race) is equal, while the performances reveal this politics to be "an ambivalent and suspicious mode of passage" (74). Through their vulgar beauty, Zuo argues, Cheung and Chen exude a saltiness that helps to manage the

bitterness of Othering that is ever present in western cultures despite the illusions of liberal politics.

Chapter 3 looks at *The Crow* (1994) and *Lust, Caution* (2007), with the pungent performances of controversial actors Bai Ling and Tang Bei. The chapter shows how the actors' hypersexualized bodies and pungent beauty are charismatic even as they reflect anxieties over cultural decay, "signaling simultaneous desire and anxiety toward tolerance, matrixial desire, and the death drive" (151). The pungency of Bai's body reflects "the reluctance toward American multiculturalism" while the response to Tang's vulgar beauty reveals "a great sense of anxiety about female sexuality" in post-Mao China (139). Zuo argues that, in the end, these women must die for the nation to survive because their pungent beauty "threatens to puncture normativity" (120), and though pungency promotes circulation and the breakdown of accumulation, tolerance can only be born from the Chinese femme's death.

In chapter 4, Zuo moves to the flavor of "sweetness" in heteronormative romance, examining the performances of Vivian Hsu in *The Knot* (2006) and Shu Qi in *If You Are the One* (2008). The chapter suggests that beautiful Chinese women in "soft-power films" are used as a sweetener to reflect the health of the nation and boost its ideological imperatives. Specifically, Zuo argues that the heterosexual relationships between female Taiwanese film stars and mainland men are meant to sweeten the politics of the One China policy. In *The Knot*, however, Hsu's over-the-top performance reflects "the insurgent vulgarity of cuteness" that draws attention to its own artificial sweetness and the surface nature of mainland notions of Chineseness (172). Zuo points out that Shu's performance, on the other hand, questions the One China policy through the deployment of hesitancy. She embodies sweetness and the mainland masculine fantasy through dependency and submissiveness; however, her depressive nature and fixation on the past results in a hesitation that "embodies Taiwanese ambivalence toward Chinese partnership" (176). Through these readings, Zuo argues that these vulgar performances of cuteness work to undermine the ideologies soft-power films are meant to instill.

Finally, chapter 5 investigates sourness and the hegemony disrupting power of laughter in Charlyne Yi's *Paper Heart* (2009) and Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra* (2016) and *Hard Knock Wife* (2018). Zuo shows how Yi's sourness comes from their awkward, genderqueer behavior which "disrupts the image of neoliberal envisionings of beauty and discipline" (210), whereas Wong imbues her performance with sexual vulgarity, which indicates the abject nature of racialized bodies and allows her to sublimate anger and play with power. These two approaches, Zuo argues, "sour the charm of ornamental Asian beauty" (232) and, through laughter, allow for a genuinely collective experience.

In addition to the psychoanalytic, historical, linguistic, and philosophical detours Zuo uses to support her arguments, each chapter in *Vulgar Beauty* also grounds itself in Zuo's own personal experiences as a Chinese-American woman, pointing to the real impact of these impressions and lending her analysis immediacy and relatability. Her metaphoric language, mostly revolving around food, offers the reader not only an intellectual exploration of the power of vulgar beauty to destabilize racial and patriarchal power structures but also a flavorful and aesthetic journey in and of itself.

Author Information



E. Nastacia Schmoll

Nastacia Schmoll is a PhD candidate in the English Seminar at the University of Zürich, Switzerland. Her past research utilized economic criticism in tandem with gender studies to examine female beauty as a form of capital. Her current research project uses spatial studies alongside ecocritical, postcolonial, and queer studies to explore how depictions of "othering spaces" in science fiction create room to interrogate and problematize people's relationships with the environment, the other, and the self.

[View all of E. Nastacia Schmoll's articles.](#)

Article details

E. Nastacia Schmoll, "Review of *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* by Mila Zuo (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.23>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053

Review of *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* by Jeffrey T. Nealon (University of Minnesota Press)

by Abigail Culpepper | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* crafts a history of performativity within contemporary theoretical thought. Through the structure of a genealogy, Nealon examines the nascence of performativity and its intersection with biopolitics and neoliberalism to predict not only the future of the performative, but also to imagine new avenues of criticism within the humanities.

KEYWORDS labor, neoliberalism, literary studies, performance, cultural studies, biopolitics, humanities, materialism

Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism. By Jeffrey T. Nealon. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. Pp 240. (paper) ISBN 978-1-5179-1086-0. US List \$25.

With witty candor, Jeffrey T. Nealon tracks the history of the performative from its origin in J. L. Austin's speech act theory to the twenty-first century, where even the meaning of life, Nealon argues, has been co-opted into the process of neoliberal production. In the face of such a challenge, Nealon argues for the importance of performativity to both our academic work and lives. Engaging with myriad schools of thought, from deconstruction and object-oriented ontology to post-critique and more, *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* is an insightful addition to both literary and cultural theory. It is important work for those concerned with modern labor politics, biopolitical critique, or even the mechanics of meaning-making in the modern age. Despite the references to deconstruction and realist philosophy, in this book Nealon puts a twist on Foucauldian genealogy. He traces the past of performativity under the linguistic turn to imagine its future under what he calls the "biopolitical turn," which blurs the lines between life, labor, and literature. Nealon's projections offer hope for future study of the humanities, as he

concludes that shifting our discussions of meaning to those of performance will allow for a more accurate description of the complex interconnectivity we experience.

Fates of the Performative is divided into two parts, "Genealogy of the Performative" and "Performativity and/as/into Biopolitics." The first examines the performative as a theoretical concept, while the second examines the future or "fates" of the performative in the current age of global neoliberalism. In the first half, Nealon makes a distinction between performativity that is concerned with meaning and performativity that is concerned with doing, or "performative force." Here, the author stakes his claim for a rethinking of the performative, with an emphasis on *doing over meaning*, as doing shows the "entanglement of forces that inheres in any seemingly settled state or being" (37). In the second half of the book, Nealon parses out the political reality of the twenty-first century, linking the death of social constructionism to the rise of a biopolitical state. According to Nealon, under the current neoliberal system in which existence has been commodified, "performative subjectivity or human capital finds its charge not through making products and commodities but in the on-going project of making ourselves" (114–15). Thus, biopolitical neoliberalism has made life the site of its own production, so Nealon argues, and as such we need a different critical approach.

In this text, Foucauldian genealogy meets historical materialism, as Nealon explains that contemporary criticism is merely reifying the neoliberal system of ceaseless production (evident in the continual production of newer, better theories to replace faulty, dated ones—planned obsolescence meets critical theory). Therefore, criticism needs to be more responsive to current political circumstances, to maintain its critical edge. To this end, Nealon engages with a variety of modern and contemporary theorists, from those of the linguistic turn to the new materialism. To illustrate the varied fates of the performative, Nealon contextualizes debates and discussions in contemporary theory with which he is engaging, such as Bruno Latour's position on post-critique, Karen Barad's notion of intra-action, and questions of labor in the twenty-first century.

Nealon begins the first half of the book with a chapter on the performative in the works of J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida. In this chapter, the author highlights the importance of the comic to the efficacy of Austin's and Derrida's theories, while warding off claims that post-structuralist theory is to blame for the post-truth era. According to Nealon, Derrida rewrites Austin's linguistic performativity as a force that is both in and beyond language, making space for affective approaches to meaning. While Nealon initially notes the presence of this "performative force" in the first chapter, he moves on in the second chapter to diagnosing the fates of two branches of the performative, each derived from the works of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, respectively. For Nealon, it is Sedgwick's theory of performativity which has become the foundation for future interventions because her

work considers the biopolitical implications of performative force present in deconstruction but left unelucidated. From this, he positions performativity as a biopolitical action, which forces us to rethink what matters, in both the semantic and material senses of the word.

In the third chapter, Nealon critiques new materialism through an analysis of the resonances between Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* and Henry David Thoreau's oeuvre. He interrogates their shared desire to get the most out of life, instilling the mundane with new (vibrant) meaning. Nealon diagnoses this move towards "more life" not as the solution to commodified life in the twenty-first century, but as the same impulse of its subjugation—biopolitical control (life must be made into more life, better life). Thus, new materialism does not offer an escape from the devaluation of life as material, instead it extends the reach of biopolitics—sucking out all the marrow of life, not for the experience in itself but as a novelty. This turn towards *bio*-political production, allows Nealon to move on from his genealogical project towards a consideration of performativity's fate(s) in the contemporary moment.

In the second half of the book, Nealon shifts his perspective forward from the historical, as he begins to sketch out the present and future fates of the performative. The author pivots to a discussion of the performative in the modern labor market in the fourth chapter, building on the expansion of the biopolitical that is detailed in chapter 3. Here, Nealon delineates how Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* continues the economic analysis of labor and capital accumulation laid out in Karl Marx's *Capital*. As an economist, Picketty relies on social science methodology which leads Nealon to posit that conceptual approaches of philosophy and cultural theory might enhance and expand this analysis of capitalism. As such, Nealon broadens the purely economic scope of this analysis with a biopolitical discussion of human capital in an age when many are employed in the so-called "knowledge economy." In this chapter, Nealon explains that while early twentieth-century capitalism focused on creating conformity through disciplinary power, neoliberal capitalism transforms the economic acts of spending and laboring into the construction of an identity, replacing disciplinary power with biopower. We are thus all caught up in "biopolitical performativity," laboring in service of our own self-creation, in which how we spend our time and money defines who we are.

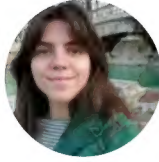
This discussion of labor continues into the fifth chapter, which is noteworthy for those interested in theories of academic labor. In this chapter, Nealon addresses Michel Foucault's lecture, "What Is an Author?" among others. He begins by noting that teaching or lecturing is often considered secondary to the academic work of writing and publishing, yet ironically the lectures of many famous authors, notably Foucault, have been published in posthumous volumes. In his discussion of Foucault's lectures, Nealon juxtaposes two developments within research in the humanities in response to neoliberalism. The first

trend illustrates a renewed interest in the author-function in response to the rise of biopolitical performativity, since the author speaks from a particular biopolitical location (at the intersection of race, class, gender, age, etc.). The second development moves away from the author-function in response to the proliferation of textuality in the internet age. This second approach includes those such as Rita Felski's "post-critical reading" and Franco Moretti's "distant reading," which respond to the growing impossibility of deciphering a specific text. Nealon closes the chapter by turning to the "lecturer" as a job title within academia. Based on the discussion of the "author-function," Nealon concludes that, due to the lack of institutional support, lecturers lack *authority*. That is to say, a lecturer's time is taken up lecturing rather than authoring. Thus, the position of a lecturer, as a particular type of author-function, is one that is not immune to the neoliberal economic model.

In the sixth chapter, Nealon considers the place of literature and criticism in a world where meaning-making has been co-opted by neoliberal technology. He provides a reading of banality in Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, as a way of illustrating how criticism which prioritizes significance and novelty is overlooking the potential of affect. It is for this reason that Nealon calls for "performative critique," which privileges what texts do over what they mean. This focus on the performative is essential as a mode of critical engagement, as Nealon argues, since this focus on performativity is at odds with neoliberal demands for new production, new meaning, new selves. Nealon concludes on this note, offering up performative critique as a mode of resistance to this current biopolitical era of neoliberalism which has neutralized the power of critique which seeks to produce new interpretations.

In all, *Fates of the Performative* is a quippy text that offers a fresh perspective on twenty-first-century criticism. Given that we are already enmeshed in a system of biopolitical neoliberalism, "performative critique" offers a new approach to criticism that is responsive to the current political circumstances. Nealon's lucid analysis of the parallels between contemporary criticism and neoliberal economics makes clear the importance of such an approach to criticism in the humanities. As such, this book is a worthwhile read for those interested in materiality and performance or those who are in search of a new mode of framing text and media in the age of biopolitics and mass production, where the metric of "meaning" is stretched thin over an endless stream of content.

Author Information



Abigail Culpepper

Abigail Culpepper is a doctoral student in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at Brown University. Their research focuses on the limits between literature and theory, the human and the nonhuman. She is particularly interested in the usage of vegetal metaphors in poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[View all of Abigail Culpepper's articles.](#)

Article details

Abigail Culpepper, "Review of *Fates of the Performative: From the Linguistic Turn to the New Materialism* by Jeffrey T. Nealon (University of Minnesota Press)," *Lateral* 12.1 (2023).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L12.1.16>

This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).
Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the [Cultural Studies Association](#).

ISSN 2469-4053